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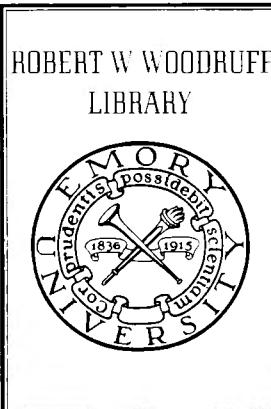
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# “RECOMMENDED TO MERCY.”

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“TAKEN UPON TRUST,” “THE TWO RUBIES,”

“SINK OR SWIM. ETC. ETC.

“ Speak of me as I am ; nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice.”

SHAKESPEARE.

A New Edition.

L O N D O N :

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## DEDICATION.



To the Readers of this, not wholly imaginary, but somewhat hastily-written Tale, these pages are dedicated ; and if, during their perusal, it should occur to some, that zeal in a good cause may have outrun discretion, the Author can only hope that a thousand faults may be forgiven, in the name of the one virtue to which he has dared to link them.

LONDON,  
*March 8th, 1862.*



# “RECOMMENDED TO MERCY.”

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## CHAPTER I.

“In life’s last scene what prodigies surprise;  
Fears of the brave, and follies of the wise!”

DR. JOHNSON.

“For death looks ugly when the view is near.”—CRABBE.

THE sun shone from a cloudless summer sky on a darkened window of the “Great City.” It was mid-day, and the hum of men was busy in the vast human hive : out on the wing were the toilers for the golden harvest : fluttering abroad were the sippers of summer sweets : but within that darkened chamber lay one whose work of life was nearly finished, and the last sands in whose glass were reduced to a few swiftly dropping grains. Let us look into the room. It is a sumptuous one, for soft carpets cover the floor, and costly furniture is spread about ; the bed is draped with purple, and on it a rich man is dying between sheets of finest linen. He has not lain there long, for but yesterday he was hale and strong, and death seemed as far from him as from the many friends by whom he had been greeted in his morning walk. He knows he is to die ; not at some indefinite period, but on that day, and on the bed on which he lies, to be removed no more till hireling hands shall place him in the “narrow house and dark,” a mass of senseless clay. Yes ! he has been told that his very hours are numbered, and, knowing this, he looks into his heart, striving to familiarise himself with the fact, and realise the conviction.

He is in the full possession of his faculties, and his memory is unimpaired ; yet his mind refuses to dwell upon the certainty that his soul is about to be required of him, and that on the

morrow he will be that dread thing which men call a *corpse*. Yesterday—and how long it seemed!—he had left his house on a mission of pleasure, as a rich man should; his horse (it was the one he prized the most) was led to his door at the appointed moment, and he had mounted the animal with a light heart, and with no presentiment of coming evil. The scene rises vividly before him now: he sees the hot sun’s rays gleaming fiercely on the broad white pavement, and glancing on the glossy coat of his favourite mare; and his own sensations as he sprang into the saddle are lived over again with the distinctness of reality.

And now he is riding rapidly on towards a western suburb, and is approaching a house wherein abides a woman who is watching for his coming. She has been his friend for years, and yet his thoughts are full of her, and of the day’s happiness he has planned for her. He pictures the bright glow of pleasure that will spread over her fair face, as he describes the long hours they are to pass together under spreading trees, and on the velvet turf of royal pleasure-grounds; and, last delight of all, the floating homewards on the moonlit river, with the countless stars above them, and no sound more harsh than the ripple of the waters and whispered words softly spoken from her heart to his.

In strange contrast with those glowing memories is the gloom that surrounds him now. He is stretched upon his bed, powerless and inert, for he retains no sensation in his lower limbs, whilst his hands, and even the muscles of his neck, can with difficulty perform their wonted functions. A great grief has seized him, but it is a grief in which there is as yet no mixture either of horror or of fear; for a species of bewilderment clouds his reasoning faculties.

“What,” he mentally asks, “is Death?” He feels no pain; a fall from his horse has injured the spine: of that he is fully cognizant; and also that paralysis is creeping slowly and surely up towards the Citadel of Life: but the change from the full vigour of manhood has been so rapid, and his hold on existence is still so strong, that the known world seems even yet to be his, while the very belief in a future and a different state of being eludes his mental grasp. He hears a murmur of the living world outside, as it rises from the thronged and busy streets, and is aware (silent and unnoticed as he lies there) that he is not alone. No; while life lasts there will be one

faithful friend, who will not leave him to wrestle single-handed with the dread images which are beginning to surround his death-bed, and that mingle so curiously with the wretched trifles that belong to mortals ; for those trifles are harassing his parting hours grievously, hanging upon his solemn thoughts like cobwebs on a grand and awful picture, defacing and obscuring it.

All things that were wont to occupy the leisure moments of his prosperous and somewhat aimless existence come crowding upon him now, and working dire confusion in his brain. What to him will be the morrow ? He will be in another world then, or happily sleeping the sleep that knows no waking ; and yet he is still, though by no wish or will of his, busying himself concerning the trivial interest with which he has no more to do than the man who had died and been buried a century ago. It was passing strange ; but he detected himself at one moment in the very act of considering how he could best dispose of the animal whose scurvy trick had brought him to this disagreeable pass. And then there flashed across him a sense of his own neglect, in forgetting to inquire whether “Miranda” (and never had the mare’s name seemed more familiar to him) had received any injury in the fall that had so disgraced her : while as to her ultimate destination he found some difficulty in making up his mind ; doubting whether at Tattersall’s she would “fetch” more than

Ah ! poor fool ! poor mortal ! No more will “Sunday shine a *betting day to you.*” There are no more earthly “settling days” to which you may look forward ; and your place in the “ring” will know you no more. The confusion of ideas, which thoughts such as these created in a brain already weakened by his accident, terrified him into a sudden suspicion that his mind was wandering ; and a cold perspiration breaking out over his forehead, he trembled violently. “God, have mercy upon me,” he exclaimed with sudden vehemence, “for I am losing my senses.”

A gentle touch (need I say it was a woman’s ?) rested on his shoulder, and recalled him to himself ; and so for a passing moment he was comforted, and his nervous tremor ceased. Ah ! how true is the oft-repeated saying, that in scenes of sorrow and of sickness, from the sight of which bold men shrink appalled, women seem in their most fitting place ! Even the weak and foolish among them find that their powers strengthen in the hour of trial, and that their nerves become more fitted for

their work ; and when a man is poor and helpless, and sick and miserable, he will rather turn for assistance and consolation to the woman he has wronged and slighted, than to the boon companion who, in happier days, had feasted at his board and called himself his friend. The remembrance of his mother comes strongly upon the suffering man when, humbled and prostrate, he is awaiting his final summons. He turns back, and through the long vista of years he sees her there. She looks as she did in the early days, long years ago, when in his fretful childhood she laid him down upon his little bed, with a mother's kiss upon his lips, and a mother's blessing on his head ; he hears her, as she patiently teaches him to lisp his infant prayer, and he sees her, as she shed tears of agony over his first great fault ; ever at hand whenever sympathy was called for, or useful service required ; forgetting herself in her constant memory of those she loved, a memory that fills her mind throughout the day, and keeps it wakeful during the watches of the night. In sorrow and in anguish does a woman bring a man into the world : the life she has given is, alas ! but too often for her one long trial ; and when the last scene that closes the sad eventful history comes, in trouble and in anguish deeper still, she strives to smooth his passage to eternity !

“Helen,” exclaimed the dying man to the woman whose loving hand rested on his shoulder, “Helen ! speak to me—and speak aloud—for whispers worry me, and I love your voice ; but, above all, give me light, and let me once more see the sun of heaven, that shines alike on the just and the unjust.”

The last words were muttered almost inaudibly ; but the woman's anxious sense had caught their import, and she sighed heavily as, moving towards the window, she prepared to do his bidding.

“Helen, this must be a dream—a dream from which I long to waken.”

For all reply, the woman, bowing down her head, murmured faintly, “No dream, alas ! Oh ! my poor Philip ! my poor love !” and a sob rising in her throat was checked with difficulty. There was a word (and that word was Death) which was clutching at her heart, as if with fingers of ice ; but she tried to seem (poor soul !) as though she were still hopeful, and looking down on him, she smiled faintly. They were silent again, not making the least of the few moments granted to them, but grieving inwardly.

The midsummer sun, which shines as brightly on the grave as on the cradle, came struggling through the half-closed shutters and drawn curtains ; tracing a narrow stream of light along the room in which the motes danced merrily, while summer insects, disporting themselves on the window-frames, hummed noisily in the sunshine. Above these mocking sights and sounds, the woman’s voice at length arose.

“ You feel no pain, love ? Tell me at least that you do not suffer.”

“ Pain ? No. For me pain of body is, I imagine, nearly over : lay your hand on me—press hard upon my limbs. Nellie, my poor girl, I feel your touch no more than I do that of the fly that settles on the coverlid. I am more than half dead already, for it is only *here* that I retain sensation ;” and he moved his head slowly. “ But kiss me, my darling, for I would gladly feel the touch of your warm lips once more.”

She leant over him, and pressed a kiss on his cold damp forehead. It was a solemn, almost a parting caress, one which sent a sharp stinging pain through Helen’s heart, as she turned aside to hide the grief she could not repress.

“ Nay, Helen, this must not be ! ” said Philip. “ My time here is short, and I cannot afford to lose one look of the face I am so soon to leave. Call up all your courage : you were ever a brave woman. Do you remember——? ”

She laid her hand softly, but firmly, on his lips : for the present was indeed no fitting moment in which to evoke memories that, alas ! were far from sinless, and she felt her boasted courage fail her as she called to mind the laws they had outraged, and the avenging Deity they had so long offended with impunity.

It was a fine and rather an intellectual head that lay upon the pillow. On it middle age had but slightly set its signet, and across the broad brow there were but few lines by which the footsteps of Time could be traced. Helen kept her eyes fixed upon the pale face, and marked its fitful changes mournfully.

Again there swept across his brain strange visions of those whom he had known in days gone by ; and figures, fanciful and swiftly changing as in a dream, flitted between his sight and reality. At length, of these untangible shadows, *one* stood out from among the rest, and, seemingly endowed with form and substance, faced him boldly. The shape was that of a woman,

pale and thin and worn ; the dress was rich and flowing, and on her transparent hands bright gems were sparkling. She was not beautiful, but had a sweet and melancholy face that dwelt upon his reproachfully. He could not escape her eyes ; for whether he closed his own to shut them out, or turned upon his pillow to avoid them, *there* they still were, with a fixed gaze, cold and ghastly. At length, to break the nightmare-like spell that bound him, he cried aloud in his agony :—

“Helen ! for the love of Heaven, stand between us ; for this is more than I can endure !”

She almost lost her breath with fear, so terrible was the voice that called to her in its mortal terror ; and then, pressing closely to him, and showering kisses on his poor torpid hands, she entreated him, by the love he bore her, to be calm ; and tell her what was the thing he dreaded.

“Calm !” he cried, with what was well-nigh a shriek ; “Calm ! when *she* has come to me for justice ? Calm ! when the wife I have wronged is calling to me to save her from disgrace ? Go, pray to God ! He may pardon *you*, but *my* portion is in the lake burning with fire and brimstone, into which you have helped to drag me ;” and with a shudder of despair, he turned on her a look of loathing and of horror.

The faithful creature still clung about him, and would not be repulsed. But was this, she asked herself, to be the reward of the life-love she had given him ? Oh no—sinner as she had been, surely God would be more merciful, and would restore the companion of her errors to a sense of all she had done and suffered for him ; and so, kneeling by his side, she prayed humbly and fervently to the God who is mighty to pardon—prayed for the one to be taken, and for the other that was to be left alone.

Exhausted by the mental struggle he had undergone, the unhappy man lay for awhile still, and almost breathless, the woman continuing patiently to bathe his clammy brow, and to administer the restoratives that had been prepared for him. Her gentle touch was better than medicine, recalling him to saner thoughts and softer feelings.

“My poor love,” he faintly murmured, “am I cruel to you ? God knows I should not be, for you have been kinder, far kinder to me than I deserve ; and I have made you but a poor return ;” and he laid his cheek upon her arm, and rested there.

“Oh ! Philip,” she moaned, “this is too hard—it cannot be that we are to part thus ?”

“Nay,” he said, “do not weep so bitterly” (for her tears were falling now like rain), “I have much to say, much to ask of you. You will not mind taking some trouble for me, Helen, when I am in my grave ?” and a faint shadow of a smile flitted across his features ; for well he knew the needlessness of his question, and how strong and untiring would be her will to serve him.

“Trouble, Philip ! only give me something that I can do for you ; let me feel that I am working for you, or I shall die ; for what have I else to live for ?”

“Live for me, dear Helen, as faithfully as you have ever lived, and let my last wishes remain in your memory as a tie to bind those whom Death has striven to part.”

“For you ! oh, Heaven ! but I am powerless and despised ! a lost, friendless creature, who is alone upon God’s earth !”

“And have you no reproaches, my poor Helen, for him who has made you desolate ? and for which, and for my many sins may God in His mercy pardon me ! But, Nellie, poor and friendless as you think yourself, you may aid me still, and give some peace to my dying hours ; all I ask is a promise, a vow I would rather call it, that in all things you will obey me, both to the letter and in the spirit.”

“As the Almighty may look with pity on me, when my last hour of trial comes, so will I—as far as in me lies—be true to you,” said Helen, solemnly.

He hung upon her words eagerly, and when her vow was spoken, he, still resting on her arm, addressed her in smothered tones :—

“Helen, you know all the history of my past life, and I have not now to tell you of the cruel mystery that veils the conduct of my wife : nay, start not, dearest ; you will not be jealous of the love of a dying man ?” and, gazing at her wistfully, the same faint smile, sweet and almost unearthly, flickered across his face. “I may go on, may I not ? I may trust that my best friend will have patience with me ?”

Helen was very human ; and having believed and hoped that his last thoughts of earthly things would have been for her, it was hard to find that another and a more absorbing interest was paramount in his breast ; she gave, however, no sign of her disappointment, but in a steady voice bade him command her in everything.

“Helen,” he continued, “I have seen my wife,—seen her here, and but a moment since. She was close to me, standing at my pillow, and with trembling lips, as though whispering words of menace in my ears.”

“A dream, dear Philip; believe me that it was a mere delusion, for your commands have been strictly obeyed, and all entrance to the room denied. It is the opiate you have taken that has conjured up these unreal visitors; strive to forget them, love,—to forget them, and to rest.”

“There is no rest for me, no rest even in the grave of the weary, for her sad face will haunt me there.”

“*Her* face! Oh, Philip!”

“It should be yours, Nellie, you would say; but no, you can grant me your forgiveness ere I go; while she,—Oh! Helen, we parted in anger, and now the longing for reconciliation comes too late. Speak again to me; tell me that other men would have acted as *I* acted—would have believed as I believed.”

“Indeed they would. It must have been hard to decide otherwise.” But Helen spoke hesitatingly; for with all her wish to comfort him, having no clue to guide her to the opinion that would best effect her object, she was as one groping in the dark.

“Then I may trust that I was not wholly unjust, and that my conduct—but alas! there is poor consolation in the thought that *my* proceedings were justified by guilt of hers; and something tells me now that I was perhaps too hasty, and that I may have utterly wronged her by my suspicions. Often of late such an idea has crossed my mind; but, presuming on the morrow that might never be mine, I banished the thought as troublesome and oppressive. Since I have lain here, many a word and look of hers that during the period of those terrible discoveries seemed to bring conviction to my mind, have forced themselves upon me, and taught me once more to doubt. Helen, I may have been in error; I may, in the angry sensitiveness for what men call their *honour*, have been wanting in the *faith* that would have saved us all; and therefore at this, my eleventh hour, have received a warning that I dare not neglect. Nellie, I am fast hastening where doubts and suspicions will harass me no more; but to the faithful love of her I leave behind me, I delegate the duty that *I* have so culpably neglected. Helen, your task must be to investigate into the

truth or falsehood of all and everything connected with Lady Thornleigh's former life. God grant that you may prove her innocent ; but if so, heavy indeed must be my guilt.”

The bed shook with the intensity of his emotion, and she, fearing that the final crisis was approaching, bent over him in speechless agitation ; but her alarm was premature, for Death was not yet ready for his prey, and after the lapse of a few minutes, Philip spoke again :—

“Forgive me, if I pain you. Remember that she was my wife, and that I loved her dearly once. If I have wronged her—foully, cruelly wronged her,—my spirit will not rest till tardy justice be done to the woman whose existence I have embittered, and to the children whose opening years I have darkened with shame. Her young sister, too—poor pretty Alice—methinks I see her now, and hear her beseeching voice, vainly imploring me to believe, and to have mercy on my wife. But I was deaf to their prayers ; I was worse than deaf, I was inhuman ; and turning those helpless women from my doors, I loaded them with scorn, heaping insult on the mother of my children, and on the wife to whose protestations and oaths of innocence I refused all credit. Truly there were no bounds to my virtuous indignation, and verily I have had my reward.”

There was a pause, which the sympathising woman knew not how to break, and after a few moments he continued thus :—

“My time is short, love ; very short for all I have to do ; and I have much to say while power of speech is granted me. My words come thick and with difficulty now, Helen, but you can comprehend my meaning, however confusedly it may be conveyed to you. Many obstacles will lie in your path, and years may possibly elapse before your work is over ; but let no difficulties deter you, and no opposition frighten you from your duty. In no other soul that lives would I repose a confidence so sacred and so entire ; and on the disinterestedness of no other friend could I so truly rely as on yours. When, therefore, the innocence (for the *proofs* of which you will diligently seek) is firmly established, and in the opinion of the good, and even in that of the world, the stain on her reputation is removed ; if my wife be *proved* to be falsely accused, and if her honour come out brightly from the ordeal it will undergo, then by you, and you alone, must restitution be made, and full amends be offered to her and to her children.”

“By me! Surely, Philip, you cannot mean this? The whole world will cry out ‘Shame!’ upon you, if such a one as I be made the judge of a woman’s conduct and the arbitress of her fate.”

“And think you, Nellie, that I owe *no* reparation to you, who have suffered injuries at my hands so deep and lasting? If in your humility you have forgotten claims so strong, it the more becomes the offender to remember them, and to show to the world how entirely you are trusted and honoured. To you then, dearest, whose love has never failed me, to you who have suffered reproach and endured deep insult at the hands of the worst enemy that ever woman had, I have bequeathed both riches and power, knowing that in your hands they will not be abused.”

“I am very grieved——” began Helen.

“Nay, hear me to the end, and mark well my words. My will is in my lawyer’s hands, and by its provisions you become possessed (with the exception of the small proportion that is entailed with the Abbey) of the whole property I leave behind me at my death. This shocks you; I see it, and am not surprised, but I will hear of no refusal, and listen to no thanks. To whom do I owe so deep a debt of gratitude and affection? For *you*, my Helen, have never deceived me;” and there was unspeakable tenderness in the feeble voice that testified to the constancy of her true woman’s love.

But Helen could not be silent. “Philip,” she exclaimed, “pardon me, if I seem to disregard your wishes, but indeed this must not be; nor can I allow you to do this unjust thing. It is not by me that your wife and children shall be wronged; and oh! believe that I never coveted your wealth, nor tried to supplant them in your affections.”

“Indeed, I know it, dear Helen; for have not the proofs of your unselfish devotion been without number? Nor is it the least among them that you accept this last charge, and this most grave responsibility. The fortune you will inherit is but left to you conditionally, to pass from your hands under the circumstances I have explained: but *under these only*. I am rich, Helen. I have money enough and to spare, while they (for aught I know) may be destitute of the comforts which habit has made necessary to them. She may be crushed by shame and poverty, may be sick even, or in prison, and yet I say to you that such retribution (if she be guilty) is not equal

to her deserts ; and that I would let her die, ay, let her *rot*, and her children with her, if she have brought this shame upon her head, and this humiliation on my name.”

“Hush, Philip,” cried the dismayed woman. “Hush, for I will not listen to such words ; you are carrying your angry feelings with you to the grave, and heaping misery on the head of her who, if she have wronged you, will pine to hear that with your latest breath you pronounced her pardon.”

“It will be pardon for *my* offences that will be needed, if, as I earnestly hope, your efforts be rewarded with success. But enough—you cannot change my resolution, and do but waste your words—all my possessions become yours to-morrow, Helen, with the understanding that should her fame be cleared, and her son, *my boy*, be permitted yet to hold up his head without shame, save for him who insulted the mother that bore him, then it will be for my noble-hearted Helen to restore to them the blessing of wealth, and with it the respect and consideration of society. And for you, dear one,” he added, feelingly and most sadly, “what can I say, and what can I offer that you will accept? At least may I not hope that you will retain enough from my abundance to keep you safe, and (when time has effaced my image) happy in your independence of the world that has so buffeted you? You are mine, Helen, still ; mine only, and for ever ;” and he looked inquiringly, and almost beseechingly, in her face.

Helen was deeply touched, feeling that for her his heart clung to earth and to earthly affections, and that human jealousy for *her* future, when his mouldering form would be wasting in the tomb, had dictated his last words. His gold was as nothing ; ay, worse than nothing to her, for in it she saw the wages of iniquity ; but the belief that he had loved her to the end was a legacy of great price ; and the poor weak woman, weak with all her fancied strength, pledged her faith to him anew, while she gloried in this last proof of his affection.

After another pause, during which the nearly exhausted man lay with upturned eyes, breathing painfully, he spoke again : “Helen, are you near me? There is such life in your presence, that I almost feel as though to die were impossible with your breath upon my cheek, and your hand so near my heart.”

And full of life indeed did that woman seem, as, her nerves

braced by the necessity for action, she stood there, firm and vigorous, by the crushed man's dying bed ; but with the healthy tone thus given to a mind but half-subdued by sorrow, came a full sense of the vast importance of her woman's mission, and, all unworthy as she deemed herself to speak of holy things, she did not shrink from the office that had devolved upon her.

“Philip,” she whispered, “your words shame me to the quick, for what am I, that you should turn to me for consolation in your need ? Let me send for one from whose lips holy words of peace and pardon will not sound as a mockery to the Almighty ; let me send for a pious man to kneel in prayer beside you : Mr. Hanesley—surely you will not refuse to see him, for he is good and kind, and never speaks harshly even to me. Philip, if you love me, grant my request.”

“No, Helen, this must not be. Without God I have lived, and I will not insult Him with abject cries for mercy now, nor listen to the Church's prayers for the dying, while my mind is full of earthly thoughts. No, dearest, I have no time to spare for lengthened services and for priestly mummeries : but do you pray for me ; and may the faith which God has given to you avail to remove the mountain of guilt that is weighing down my spirit.”

Many a day had elapsed since Helen had dared to kneel before her Maker and utter a supplication to our “Father who is in heaven.” Those sacred words refused to come at her bidding then, but in their stead the lowly and earnest exclamation, “Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner,” rose from her full heart, and she smote her breast as the cry of the repentant publican broke from her quivering lips.

“For me, Helen,” urged Philip, as the earnest voice seemed rising to Heaven ; “pray now for me, for surely I have need of pardon.”

Yes, the depth and sincerity of *her* repentance had struck a chord upon the heart that God in His mercy had not utterly hardened, and it was with deep awe that he added, from the depths of his troubled heart, “I have heard of generous promises made to fallen sinners, and surely there will be joy in heaven when you repent.”

Then Helen fell upon her knees, and in a low and solemn voice, each word of which sank deeply into the heart of the dying man, she prayed, “Our Lord's Prayer.” Philip had not

listened to it since he was a child at his mother's knee, and when the words “Deliver us from Evil” had been repeated mechanically, or as applicable only to the troubles and dangers of this world. He had no earthly evils to dread now ; temptation could no longer assail him, and mortal enemies he had none to fear ; but in the world of spirits to which he was hastening, what need might there not be for help when the cry for it would be unavailing, and when the prayer for Deliverance from Evil would be no longer heard in the kingdom that endureth for ever !

Through the gathering twilight, Helen's voice arose upon the hushed air ; and when the last word was spoken, exceeding was her joy to hear from the white lips of him for whom she had so fervently supplicated, the dying entreaty (which, though uttered by one who had been a chief of sinners, was answered at the eleventh hour) of “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

Again there was silence ; and when Philip Thornleigh spoke again his voice was changed, and his words were scarcely intelligible.

“I hear strange noises in my ears,” he muttered, “and my eyes are dim. Shall I see her again, think you ? She will not look with anger on me now, for I have done all I can. Surely there is some one near me—see, there ! It is the face of a little child, and her long hair is on my face, and her hands upon my eyes ! Oh, my pretty Marie—my own little girl ;” and then there was a gradual sinking of words into fading whispers, a low soft laugh, and he lay as if in sleep.

“How happy !” thought Helen, as she watched his placid rest ! “How happy could he die thus, with visions of his lost loved ones near him, and with the gentle touch of his child's fingers on his cheek !” Gladly would she have prolonged for him this precious slumber, but the sense of a yet unfulfilled duty urging her to rouse him once again, she passed her hand over his forehead tenderly.

“Pardon—forgiveness—tell her that I forgave her, and that I loved the children.” These were the faltering sounds that, feebly uttered, told her that his soul still lingered.

“One word more,” she whispered ; “all you have required of me I will faithfully perform, but——”

“No more, my Helen, you have promised, and my mind is at rest.”

“ But for my satisfaction, dearest Philip, and, above all, for *theirs*, you have yet one more duty to perform. Think you that, with the unsupported testimony of my own assertions, I can venture into the presence of those whose prejudices against me must be indeed insurmountable ; or that I can claim a right to judge of actions committed by a lawful wife ? No—such daring were indeed beyond my power ; but were the wishes you have expressed, and the commands you have laid upon me, to appear as written evidence, and attested by your signature, then indeed they might be induced to accept of reparation, even at hands which they must deem so vile as mine.”

“ You are right, Helen, and quick-witted as you ever were ; but hasten with what you have to do, for life is ebbing fast. Place your hand upon my heart,” and she, obeying him, knew that there was indeed no time to lose. From the moment that the medical attendant had pronounced the dread decree that rendered his further visits useless, the sufferer had shown a marked dislike to the approach of any person but the woman whom he called his “best friend,” and in whose presence alone he wished to die. And so it chanced that when, in furtherance of her object, she searched for writing materials, and found one important item wanting, she felt for a moment uncertain how to act. Rather, however, than agitate the dying man by taking active measures to remedy the deficiency, she had recourse to the blank leaf of a large volume which stood on the table, and on it (little dreaming of the consequences which might ensue from her incautious act) she wrote the words which might eventually consign her to comparative poverty.

“ And now, dear Philip,” said the persevering woman (whose energy in the cause of justice seemed untiring), “ now I greatly fear that, unless you are able to sign this paper, the precaution we have taken will be unavailing. Will you not endeavour to do so ? Let me raise your arm ; one effort, and it may be done.”

She lowered the coverlid, and lifted up the powerless limb, so lately full of muscular vigour ; but alas ! it fell heavily and by its own weight upon the bed : and he, sighing wearily, and murmuring those saddest of all words, “ Too late,” felt, for the first time within his memory, large tears filling his eyes and rolling slowly down his cheeks.

Helen's heart well-nigh broke at the sight ; but it was no moment for the indulgence of tender emotions : there was work for others to be done, and the time for weeping would come when she had naught else to do.

“Not too late, dear Philip,” she said, encouragingly, “for *one* witness to the authenticity of this paper will be sufficient for our purpose ; and your old servant Turner is, I am sure, close at hand, anxiously waiting in hope that he may be permitted to see you once again.”

It needed but the opening of the door to prove how well founded was her conjecture, for there in truth stood the faithful serving-man—the constant attendant on his master, and who, despite of age (for he had numbered more than threescore years), and kept unwearied watch during the anxious hours of the night and day.

“Turner,” said Helen to him on his entrance, “you are required to witness that this expression of Sir Philip’s wishes has been written by me at his desire and from his dictation. Is this not so, dear Philip ?” she asked ; and on his signifying his assent, she proceeded to read aloud from the volume that she held, and on which she had hastily inscribed the few words the importance of which appeared to her so vital. The ceremony was soon over, and then Philip, turning his eyes towards the old man, said kindly :—

“Come near me, Turner. This will be nearly your last service for your master, my old friend ; but you have been faithful to us through three generations ; and in your declining years you will be cared for when I am gone. Raise me up : do not fear to hurt me : I feel nothing now, and am helpless as an infant.”

By their united efforts they raised him on the pillow ; and then, a pen being placed between his fingers, Helen guided the hand that traced his signature upon the page. The old man next, with shaking fingers, traced his name, *Richard Turner*, as witness to the document, sobbing as he did so, and shedding the scant and hardly wrung tears of age. A kiss was reverently pressed upon the cold and torpid hand of the master whom from childhood to manhood he had loved and respected ; and then the two, who were so soon to part, were left once more alone. The room was restored to its former quiet ; and all that was left for Helen was to count the feeble respirations, as the soul seemed struggling to escape its earthly tenement.

Night had closed upon the scene, and, the window being open to admit the air, a light wind swept into the chamber, raising the gauzy curtains, and bringing with it curious moths that fluttered to the candle, and there perished.

Suddenly there broke upon the air a wail of mournful music, soft and low, and sounding almost unearthly to the overwrought imagination of that lonely watcher. It burst forth clear and thrilling, the melody being wildly beautiful—one of those exquisite *Lebewohls* which (when played by the music-loving people from whose hearts they spring) speak so eloquently to the sorrowing ones who are to part for ever.

The touching “Farewell” found its way through the mists of approaching dissolution to the dulled senses of the expiring man, and brought back his wandering soul to earth. For a single moment he was young again—young, with a loved wife near him, and gay children playing by his side : with happiness around him and hope before, and a path strewn with roses on which their feet would tread !

“Gertrude, my own,” he murmured ; and Helen no longer grudged her those last thoughts, as the calm face grew calmer still beneath their soothing influence. And so, amidst those blissful memories, he might have yielded up his spirit, but for a disturbing noise of voices speaking loudly, as though in angry argument. Helen, fearing that the sound might in that solemn moment trouble his repose, gently disengaged her hand, and, half opening the door, beheld a sight that filled her with dismay. In the passage, nay, almost in the doorway, stood a lady, whom she new to be Philip’s cousin, and the “enemy” connected in his mind with the sorest trial in his life.

Her aspect was dark and menacing as, turning haughtily from Helen, she repeated her commands to the housekeeper (with whom she had been disputing) to admit her at once to the presence of Sir Philip. In a moment Helen was by his side again.

“Philip, dearest,” she whispered, “it is your cousin ; will you not forgive, that you in your extremity may be forgiven likewise ?”

“Forgive,” he muttered, and his words were scarcely audible, “who asks for pardon ? She has kissed me—let me die in peace !”

There was no time for further exhortation, for ere Helen could interpose to prevent it, the intruder had pushed her

way into the room, and taken up her station at the bed's foot.

“A fitting attendant you have chosen, my dear cousin!” she exclaimed, with a kind of desperate composure; “a fitting attendant truly to wait upon you in your sickness! I marvel at your folly, Philip, and at your wilful blindness to the deceptions practised on you. Surely you might find a more fitting nurse than a person of that description!”—and she pointed at Helen scornfully; “but I must now really insist upon her removal, for if she remain, it will of course be impossible for me to do so, and I am most desirous——”

But here Helen, no longer able to keep silence, interposed:

“For the love of God, madam,” she cried, “be silent! Do you not know that he is dying?”

Mrs. Wraxham (for so she was called) haughtily scanned the eager woman with an irritating impertinence, which under any other circumstances would have stung her to the quick.

“Is it possible,” she asked, “that you have the audacity to address me, and to remain in my presence when I have desired you to withdraw? Go, you shameless woman! retire to the infamous places to which those of your class resort, and——”

But she had said enough: for scarcely were the cruel words spoken, when Philip, rising in his bed with convulsive but apparently unconscious effort, shook his hand wildly towards her, and pronounced an awful curse upon her head!

Alas! that those fearful words should have been the last his dying lips could frame! In vain did Helen, with strained attention, yearn for one more sound from the tongue that death had silenced—all was mute and still: and when they had laid him gently down, the angry frown was still upon his brow, though the once warm heart had ceased to beat.

So Helen was left alone to pray beside the dead, and to take a sad and salutary lesson from the Great Teacher, who, abroad and at home, is ever forcing upon us His stern and unwelcome warnings, and lying in wait for us both at our goings-out and at our comings-in.

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## CHAPTER II.

“The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together ; our virtues would be proud, if our faults whipped them not ; and our crimes would despair, if they were not cherished by virtues.”

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

HELEN LANGTON was the youngest of three sisters, daughters of a country surgeon, who had for many years been what is called a “respected inhabitant” of a cathedral city. He was styled *Doctor* by the unenlightened, and his cure of bodies was extensive and lucrative : it had, moreover, descended to him in the way of inheritance, *his* father before him having been entrusted with the same important functions. Dr. Langton was a practitioner of the good old school—physicking and phlebotomising, cauterising and torturing, after the manner of his predecessor ; looking with an eye of suspicion on all things new, and in his opinion inexpedient, and growing fat and facetious on the diseases of his fellow-beings. It was said that the Doctor had made “a power of money,” and so in truth he had ; but, what was more to the purpose, he had kept it well in hand—not spending his substance in vain attempts to make a figure in the world, nor being cursed with the fatal ambition of overtopping those who were of higher standing than himself.

The old-fashioned “gig” in which the parent, to whose business he had succeeded, had been wont for nearly half a century to install his ponderous person when proceeding on his professional visits, was not deemed unworthy of conveying on similar errands, the slimmer and more active son ; nor was it till a sickly wife and two socially ambitious daughters insisted on the superior claims to respectability of a “brougham,” that the time-honoured “tilbury” was reduced to the inactivity that its advancing years demanded.

There was an encouraging cheerfulness in the Doctor's ruddy face, and a coaxing insinuation in his voice, that in a sick-room were invaluable ; and, to judge by the expansive benevolence of both his words and manner, not even the double-

sized heart of the great Dupuytren\* could have been of larger dimensions, or more filled to overflowing with the milk of human kindness.

Perhaps at home, and viewed under the cold wet blanket of reality, the popular provincial Esculapius might have appeared just a *little* less genial, a trifle less communicative, and in a slight degree more given to slumber and port wine than might have been suspected from his demeanour in public ; but then it must be remembered that moments of relaxation are absolutely necessary to hard-working professional men, and that those for whom they labour have no right (provided their ailments are not neglected) to inquire into the secrets of a doctor's domestic life.

No one ever dreamt of calling the Doctor a “bad father ;” for though his whole soul was in his surgery, and what heart he had was centered in the dissecting-room, he rewarded his children for the straight limbs and rosy cheeks which did him credit, by allowing them full liberty of action ; provided always that they did not encroach on his time, or trouble him with complaints which must necessarily be cured gratis. Under these circumstances the Doctor's parental character remained *unimpeachable*, only laying itself open to criticism on one point—namely, that he openly preferred his sons to his daughters, from the indubitable fact that the former might be eventually rendered useful as *assistants*, while the latter could only hope to be so as the possible partners of other men.

Mrs. Langton was one of that numerous body of rarely-heard-of and never-seen women who are conventionally termed “worthy.” She had brought a numerous family into the world, and, content with that portion of her maternal duty, had at once subsided into an invalid, interesting to no one but herself, and absorbed in the care of her own health and the nursing of her own nerves. The Doctor (whose tender solicitude for the fretful fancies of other ladies had earned for him many a “one pound one”) had very little commiseration to bestow on the wife of his bosom. In the early days of her chronic invalidism, he had looked upon her as a *specimen*, studying her curiously if not lovingly ; but after awhile, having committed the catalogue

\* The heart of Dupuytren, the celebrated French physician, was ascertained after death to weigh as much as twenty ounces ; the average weight of that organ in the human body being no more than twelve ounces.

of her diseases to memory, he ceased to refer to it—thus adding another, and a daily recurring one, to her long list of personal grievances.

The girls, thanks to their having been born and raised in the atmosphere of complaints and camphor julep, were spared any anxiety on the score of their parent's sufferings ; looking upon her condition as the normal one of middle-aged ladies, who having conscientiously done their husbands and the state good service in their time, sink afterwards (and according to the laws of nature) into inactivity and decay. Their world—that is to say, their companions and familiar friends—confidentially stigmatised them as utterly selfish and incurably heartless ; pitying greatly the amiable and deserted mother, left by “those giddy, thoughtless girls” to the “enjoyment” of her own ill health, and the depressing study of her favourite authoress—*id est*, the “Buchans,” “Reeces,” and “Grahams,” whose “Medicine made Easy” has long been the solace of many an ailing and apprehensive female.

Helen was the first of a second instalment of family blessings which made their appearance after a respite of some half-dozen years had been mercifully accorded to the mourning mother of many children. She was not welcomed warmly—not so warmly indeed as a little stranger (who might in time become a friend) had a right to expect ; moreover, she was a troublesome child, petulant and vociferous, requiring an amount of attention that was rarely paid her, and receiving more cuffs than caresses from the elder sisters, whose maternal instincts had yet to be developed. Both as an infant and as she grew to child's estate, Helen Langton may fairly be said to have been what is called “neglected.” To teach her was no one's particular business, and thus she went her way ; picking up her small mental living by such scraps (not always of the wholesomest description) as fell in her way, and finding no favour with the elders and betters, to whom she was but little inclined to order herself either lowly or reverently.

It was perhaps well for the girl that, when she had arrived at the age of ten, an orphan boy, Mrs. Langton's nephew, was received into the Doctor's house, there to pass the holidays allowed by the head of the “seminary for young gentlemen,” where he received his education. He was a lank ugly lad, with sharp bones and a hungry face, and was besides sandy-haired and freckled ; but, unprepossessing as was his appearance,

Helen took kindly to him, and was moreover grateful and attentive when the boy, whose love of reading was beyond his years, put books into her hands and, pitying her ignorance, taught her how to learn.

There was a something in the nature of Edward Burrowes that led him to fraternise with the neglected little cousin, whose frank nature and robust and rosy beauty formed so strong a contrast to his own scant personal gifts and many shortcomings.

To a woman it is a great curse to know no “natural fear;” and keenly did Helen feel this truth when, in after years, she stood alone before the tribunal of the world’s opinion ; but as a fearless child she was very happy—happy especially in her protection of the friendless boy, who clung to her as the feeble will to the energetic and self-confiding.

With her cousin Edward’s help, and through her own keen desire for the kind of reading which pleased her fancy, Helen amassed in her young mind a good store of information. It is true that she could never hope to become either that ingenious piece of mechanism, an accomplished young lady, or that anomalous and graceless thing, a “learned girl;” but she had grown to love reading for its own sake, and had also begun to appreciate the beauty of high thoughts clothed in immortal verse—feeding on the melody of poetry as on sweet and intellectual music. But, perhaps, what the child enjoyed the most were truthful records of perils encountered in distant wildernesses, far away among the heathen savages of torrid lands, where adventurous explorers, wandering into tangled jungles, rouse the startled wild beast from his lair, and make him feel man’s sovereignty. Of bold men such as these, Helen, as she sat entranced over her semi-childish books, would make heroes, worshipping them as female creatures will—whether the foe their gods have conquered be the lion in his den, the burning sun of the arid desert, or the tempestuous waves that surge beneath the wanderers on the distant ocean.

Meanwhile, Millicent and Sarah Langton had progressed into oldish-young womanhood, and as yet no partnership of the kind long since anticipated by the Doctor had been more than talked about for either of them. They were handsome, showy girls, well dressed, and what men call “jolly;” and for awhile (blessed with rude health, high spirits, and an utter absence of sensitiveness) they went on their way rejoicing. But, unfortu-

nately for them and for their future prospects, troops of Dragoons, at once light and heavy, fast and slow, were accustomed to make periodical descents upon their native city, coming and going like the swallows, bringing with them a summer of hope, but leaving nothing but a winter of discontent behind.

Many a “smart young civilian,” well-to-do and eligible would have gladly shared his future prospects—clerical, medical, or legal (as they might chance to be)—with one or other of the Doctor’s daughters. There was the Curate, whose father (a small landed gentleman of no particular family, but a worthy man withal) having bought a moderate-sized living for his son, was naturally anxious that he should, with as little delay as possible, give, in the shape of wife and children, hostages to fortune. The Curate himself, being sentimental and musical, entered fully into his parent’s views, and as a preparation for the mild matrimony he contemplated, sang simple ballads, tinctured with melancholy: and would infallibly have asked for the hand and heart of the melody-loving Millicent but for the intervention of a fast young Cavalry Captain, who bolted off the course at the first hint savouring of serious intentions, but whose black whiskers and scarlet broadcloth (the Devil’s own colours) drove the mild Curate to seek a wife elsewhere the moment the cloven foot was seen in the Doctor’s drawing-room.

Millicent was the eldest and, perhaps, the best of those two ill-brought-up and somewhat weak-minded young women. Her matrimonial failures had been frequent and conspicuous; and, with every wish to conceal from herself the mortifying fact, she could not but be aware that her beauty was on the wane, and that a ten years’ warfare with adverse fate had told upon the roundness of her form, and produced angles where angles should not be.

Under those circumstances, is it surprising that she had her moments of peevishness and her hours of gloom, and that a little jealousy of younger and brighter faces should sometimes bring a cloud upon her own? Faults and failings such as these might too truly be laid to the charge of Millicent Langton; but let us have patience with her, oh! my Reader: for with a woman’s weaknesses she has a woman’s heart, and, unless exasperated overmuch by the sneers of her own unsympathising sex, she will pass bravely through the hard trial of incipient old-maidenism, and come forth again the better and the wiser for the struggle. Give her a few more years of painful

transition, and then the sight of the silver lines traced on the dark hair having ceased to grieve her, and the first wrinkles having done their worst, she will gather her garments over her shoulders, and, bidding adieu to vanity, will let her youth die decently.

Meanwhile Helen, as the Cinderella of the family, would but for the solace of her beloved books have led a rather unhappy as well as an unprofitable existence. She was a useful, handy little being, doing diligent service with her small fingers, and spending many a weary hour among heaps of faded finery, listening to talk of lovers and to readings of romance. Of what was said or done, read or thought, in that secluded little upper chamber, the father never inquired. The pulse of the heart, though beating in the breasts of his own fair daughters, he had no leisure to feel ; nor was the “unruly member” a thing of interest to him, save as a guide to the internal condition of a profitable patient. In short, it may be doubted whether concern for his children could have been fairly awakened by anything short of the chance fracture of their bones, or the breaking out of a malignant fever in the household.

When Edward Burrowes returned to Warminster for his last Christmas holidays he was seventeen, and his cousin Helen thirteen years of age ; but though in years he was fully four her senior, in demeanour, in experience of life, and in knowledge of character she was double that number in advance of him. Being at that uncertain age usually denominated “awkward,” he was by no means improved either in person or manners ; having all a greyhound’s bony length of limb, with none of the grace that characterises the canine creature, and being blessed with the thinness of flank so bepraised by hero describers, without the breadth of chest which is considered to be its fitting accompaniment. It was evident, from the ill-chosen and worse-fitting habiliments that covered his ungainly person, that the “Seminary” was no school for the formation of taste ; and the boy was besides painfully shy, dreading contact with young ladies morbidly, and conscious of but one bugbear more terrible—that one being his conceited cousin Robert, of whose jibes and jeers he had for years been the unhappy victim.

This ingenuous tormentor of one whose meek submission should have been his safeguard against persecution, was two

years older than Edward, and was preparing for his examination as an army surgeon. He was idle, selfish, and given to an inordinate use of tobacco ; added to which qualifications for failure he was better up in chaff than chemistry, and came out far stronger in slang than in knowledge of surgical cases. The first greeting of this hopeful youth was in this wise :—

“Well, Teddy, old fellow,” he cried (while a cordial thump between the shoulders made the younger boy red all over), “you have been sparing the scissors to some purpose this time, eh ? Yellow hackle as I live ! what will you take for your next clip ?”

There was a general laugh at the expense of poor Edward’s incipient manhood and deeply blushing face and ears ; but Helen, bursting into the room at this trying moment, turned the crimson on his thin cheek to a flush of joy.

“Now, Robert,” she exclaimed, after a warm welcome to her cousin, “I won’t have him teased, you great awkward soldier lout.” (She was not very discriminating in her expressions when roused.) “He is *my* friend, and he and I mean to be always together. Don’t we, Eddy ?” she added, turning her bright, eager face towards him.

“Oh, you do—do you, you little flirt ?” laughed Robert. “You will be as bad as the other girls by-and-by—only give you time, and I would not be the man in your way.”

“Wouldn’t be, indeed !” retorted the indignant Sarah ; “I should like to know what girl ever looked at you.”

“Girls never do look—oh, never—wouldn’t do such a thing for the world,” cried the provoking Robert ; upon which Sarah, fearing to be worsted in the war of words, prudently beat a retreat.

During this short colloquy, Helen had drawn the discomfited lad from the room, and in another moment was in the garden with him, pacing along the snow-covered walks, and (regardless of the cold) imparting to him with rapid utterance all she had done during his absence—all she had read, and all she had committed to memory.

“And you, Eddy,” she asked, when her communications were at last ended, “what have you been about ? Papa is afraid that you will never be successful in your examination ; for he says it is so very hard, and that he fears you are too—too idle to be the first.”

She had hesitated in her choice of an adjective, and the one she fixed upon at last was felt to be as inappropriate as any that had previously occurred to her.

“My uncle is very kind to interest himself so much about me,” said Edward; “but I have made up my mind not to pass that examination.”

“Come, that *is* good,” shouted the ubiquitous Robert, as he darted upon them from behind the thick cover of a yew-hedge. “That really *is* good. But how about the examiners passing *you*?”

“I mean I don’t intend to try,” said his victim meekly.

“Not try? Well, I must say I should like to be as great a man as you, and could choose what I’d be—would not I throw all the doctoring to the deuce, that’s all! But I say! won’t you have a proper wigging from the governor? I should like to know how you mean to get out of that.”

“I don’t know. I shall be sorry to displease him; but I mean to pass an examination—your examination—the one for the army.”

“And you think that easy, do you?” sneered Robert. “Why, what a muff you are! You’ve got a nomination for a clerkship—a good hundred a year to begin with—and you give it up, just because you’re too idle or too stupid to try your luck.”

“Oh, go along, do,” interposed Helen; “you don’t know what we’re talking about. I wish you would leave Eddy to me.”

Robert laughed as he walked off; and then the boy entered awkwardly on his explanation.

“Nellie,” he began, “do you know I have given up reading?”

“Given up reading! Good gracious, Eddy!”

“Yes, but only *our* reading. I used to think it a fine thing to know and remember what so many other fellows didn’t. But one day I asked myself why I read all those books, and then I found it was all through vanity, and that, besides its doing no good, no one really liked me the better for all I knew; so I left off.”

“And what put it into your head that no one liked you the better for being clever?”

“Why, Nellie, you know that no one here, except you, ever did love me; and at school it was just the same, and how

lonely I used to feel !” And tears stood in the lad’s eyes at the recollection of the solitary hours he had passed.

“ There now, you are going to cry !” exclaimed his unsentimental listener. “ Now, that is being a spoon, Edward ; I do believe you’re a girl. Boys never cry. How stupid you are !”

“ Am I ? Well I won’t be again ;” and he tried hard to smile. “ But, dear Nellie, it is not so much my own stupidity, as some wise words I read one day, that have changed my mind and decided my course.”

“ Wise words, indeed ! Very foolish ones, I should say, if they have made you idle and dull, and satisfied to be a mere nobody—a stupid fellow like those one sees every day—talking such nonsense !”

“ Well, but hear the lines : I forget whose they are, but whoever wrote them is a wise man. He says, speaking of those who have stored their memory with the sayings of great men, and who, after years of toil, have earned a name for knowledge above their fellows :—

‘When with much pains this boasted learning’s got,  
‘Tis an affront to those who have it not.’

I knew then, Helen, why the fellows disliked and avoided me.”

“ Yes, they were jealous : I can understand that.”

“ But why should one wish to make others jealous, Nellie, dear ?” asked the boy, gently ; “ and why should one work for what can only gratify and be of benefit to oneself ? Don’t be afraid, however. I shall read hard, and study night and day, to prepare for the examination ; and if I pass, and if I get an appointment to a regiment, why then I shall be independent, and, what is more, I may be able to benefit others. And won’t I try to be of use ? Helen, if you had but known my father ! He was so good and unselfish, devoting himself entirely to the service of the sick and the wicked. He died of brain-fever, brought on by over-exertion ; but even when his mind wandered, it was to scenes of bliss hereafter, where he would meet again the pardoned sinners, who through his ministering had learnt to seek for forgiveness above, and to lead better lives.”

Helen’s little hand stole softly into her cousin’s as, with faltering voice he told her of his dead father.

“Did you see him when he was dying?” she asked, in a low and awe-struck voice.

“Yes; and my mother laid his hand upon my head, and asked him to bless me. But he could not, Helen, for his spirit had fled even then ; and my mother,”—but here his voice broke down entirely, and laying his head on Helen’s shoulder he sobbed aloud.

They were seated on a garden-bench, and both for a time forgot that they were cold and shivering ; but at length Edward roused himself, and checking his sobs said, with an effort at cheerfulness :—

“How weak and foolish you must think me, Helen ! but it is past now ; and so ‘good-bye’ philosophy and poetry, and all the beautiful things I used to dream of. It is all chemistry and anatomy for me now.”

“And cataplasms and cod-liver oil,” added Helen, with a shrug of her young shoulders, and a show-off of her medical lore ; but, nevertheless, the lad rose in her estimation from that hour.

Though the doctor made little or no opposition to the change of professions desired by his nephew, there was still much to be done, and many difficulties to be surmounted, by the latter before his wishes could be carried into effect. In default of the assistance (often expensive enough) which is usually administered by a functionary called a “crammer,” Edward was fain to have recourse to his own powers of mind ; and thus by persevering efforts at self-instruction, and supported by a hope which never deserted him, he went steadily forward to the goal of his wishes. Helen, though still little more than a child in years, was ever at hand to comfort him when in difficulty, and to cheer him on his tedious way ; and when the time came for the momentous trial which was to decide his fate, no loving sister could have more anxiously waited the event, or rejoiced more gladly in his success.

Three years had been passed in toil and study before Edward Burrowes received the reward he merited—namely, an appointment of assistant-surgeon in a distinguished infantry corps. During those years he had been often separated, and that for months together, from the girl-friend whose affection was so dear to him ; but whether engaged in the arduous duty of a “hospital walker,” or when sojourning in distant cities, with no dear sister to whisper words of encouragement in his ear,

the belief that she thought sometimes of the absent one was the brightest ray that gleamed across the young surgeon's path.

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### CHAPTER III.

“Unfit for conflict, round beset with woes,  
And man, whom least she fears, her worst of foes.”  
“If on your fame, *our* sex a blot has thrown,  
‘Twill ever stick, through malice of *your own*.”—YOUNG.

DR. LANGTON'S house stood on the outskirts of the town ; and though its front windows looked into what might be called a street, those at the back had a pleasant view over lawn and garden, where quiet reigned, and where, for aught that gave token of the proximity of a city, that “shady calm retreat” might have been many a mile away from the haunts of vice and the excitements of dissipation. On the lawn stood large trees, with spreading branches sweeping the soft turf ; a scent of sweet and old-fashioned flowers filled the air ; and, shaded by a canopy of aromatic leaves, a young girl might have been seen one summer afternoon seated beneath the aged walnut-tree, whose rugged limbs bore promise of goodly fruit.

Of all the children whose merry voices had once disturbed the dearly-loved quiet of the poor useless mother, that girl alone remained to grace the home they had abandoned. Death had not visited them, but they had dispersed, and gone their several ways in search of fortune. Millicent, guided by a keen matrimonial instinct, had accepted the offer of a rich acquaintance, whom she had accompanied to India in a sort of composite capacity, the duties of which were not clearly defined, and its pleasures extremely doubtful. Sarah, to the great relief of the rest of the family, had at last obtained the object of her desires, and appropriated to herself the use and service of a young attorney, “Brice” by name, who was henceforth to enjoy the privilege of supplying her wants by the hard taxing of his miniature brain, and the indefatigable working of his stumpy fingers.

Of the sons, Robert, the eldest, appeared to have abjured the

abode of his youth entirely. He had changed positions with his cousin, and now sat upon the office-stool vacated by that more promising member of the family : looking down from his “pride of place” on the profession of his father, and concealing the mortifying fact of the surgery and physic-bottles from the brother clerks whose pedigrees could bear investigation better than his own. Selfish, coarse-minded, and heartless—spoilt by indulgence (for, though the least worthy, the Doctor had ever loved the boy above the rest)—a career of extravagance and vicious indulgence had been entered upon by Robert Langton, which threatened to end fatally.

His demands for money were incessant, and his debts accumulated daily ; while his father, alarmed by the accounts which occasionally reached him, began to feel the qualms of self-reproach which arise when the bitter fruits of experience have yet to be digested. Once, and once only (for the errand did not prove pleasant enough to be repeated) did the Doctor undertake a journey to the metropolis, there to make personal inquiry into the goings-out and comings-in of his hopeful offspring.

It was a sacrifice that he made to duty and to parental affection—a sacrifice of time, that was money, and of habits which were daily becoming less mutable ; but he found a sorry sight to reward him for the effort he had made. Hollow-eyed, cadaverous, and utterly disreputable (as in his father’s eyes was the appearance of the dissipated Robert), the latter could not conceal from his parent his disgust at the inroad among his fashionable acquaintances of the elderly “snob,” whose dress and demeanour and (worst crime of all) whose professional “white tie” proclaimed the country apothecary at a glance.

There was clearly nothing to be done with Robert, whose callous nature rendered him alike impervious to the soft touch of affection and to the harder smitings of parental rebuke ; and so, with a heavy heart, the Doctor returned from his short and fruitless expedition. There was but one of his family to welcome him : for Mrs. Langton, whether stultified by the heterogeneous mixture of her self-inflicted remedies, or wearied by the “rack of her too easy chair,” was in her half-paralysed nonentity scarcely to be counted as an existent being. But Helen met the wearied man on his return,—Helen, who would so gladly have shared his anxieties and soothed him with a daughter’s love.

“Father,” she said (and throwing her arms round his neck, she kissed him fondly)—“Father, I am glad to see you at home again—so glad! but do you bring good news? Is Robert sorry? Was he glad you came to see him?” And thus she poured forth her rapid questions; while the Doctor, cross, tired, and disappointed, divested himself of the travelling outer garments which covered his neat professional costume of solemn black, and, ensconcing himself in his business chair, proceeded at once to the task of making up for the time he had wasted. The presence of his daughter and the nature of her questions irritated him sorely, and he answered her with undisguised impatience.

“Don’t you see I’m busy? There, go to bed; your brother is alive and well;—what do you want more? I have no time for chattering now. Off with you!” And Helen, as she closed the door, heard the scratching of the pen as it scrawled along the paper, but not the heavy sigh which would have made her forgive the seeming harshness of his words.

It was a few weeks after the Doctor’s visit to London that Helen, having found a refuge from the heat of the midday sun, had established herself with her books and work under the pleasant shade of the spreading tree. She was very handsome,—tall, fully formed, and of a clear rich paleness. Her hair was dark, abundant, and glossy; and her eyes, not large, but long, with somewhat drooping lids, were full of the tenderness which Love’s touch might ignite into dangerous passion. But what need to describe each feature in detail, when it is sufficient to say that of all the exquisite gifts of beauty which Nature can lavish on her children, scarce one was wanting to make up the sum of loveliness that had fallen to the share of Helen Langton.

The girl leant back against the tree, and her threaded needle hung idly from her fingers; for very enervating was the perfume of the roses as, carried on the balmy air, it entwined itself round many a deep-seated emotion in that warm young heart, stealing from it its first virgin purity.

In after years, when bitterer breathings had brought sadder thoughts to Helen, and when the “airy tongues that syllable men’s names” had been busy with the one she dared no longer call her own, her faithful fancy brought back to her the memory of that summer garden, with the odour of its roses and the pure kisses that the zephyr’s breath had left upon her cheek.

She was not alone, for stretched upon the grass at her feet lay a young man, whose sole occupation was that of gazing at her fair face admiringly. Edward Burrowes (for it was he) was no longer the shy awkward youth, shrinking from woman's notice, and crushed by the ridicule of an underbred boy. He was dressed in the uniform of the corps to which he had been appointed (a battalion of which was then stationed at Warminster), and the dark dress became him well. Though still plain in feature and somewhat gaunt and bony of frame, his long course of mental exertion and honourable endeavour had not failed to leave their impress on his countenance and character ; nor had his military drill and exercises been less successful in giving firmness and decision to his carriage, and vigour and activity to his limbs. Reader, can you feel any interest in this poor and obscure young man ? Can you care to follow the humble soldier-surgeon through the complicated perils which are at once the trials and the rewards of the lot he has chosen ? If you cannot, and if, according to the fashion of the world, you can overlook, in your admiration for more brilliant heroes, the obscure but hardworking men by whom success is earned, then indeed have we wasted too much time in describing this humble hero, and we must pass on to other themes. The silence between the two cousins lasted till Edward, thinking he read the girl's thoughts aright, responded to them thus :—

“Helen, I have something pleasant to tell you ; I have just heard that Thornleigh is to remain here with the dépôt.”

She answered him with a smile, pleasant but provoking :—

“Of course he is ; I heard your news last night.”

“Ah, well ! I might have guessed as much from your bright face to-day. Nellie, how fond you are of that man !”

She remained silent, but looked flushed and angry.

“Helen, dear,” he continued, “tell me that it is not so ; for I cannot endure to think that you are wasting the treasure of your affection upon a man whom I know to be——” and he stopped hesitatingly.

“To be what ? Pray go on ; only remember,” she added, with all a woman's inconsistency of purpose, “that I shall neither listen nor reply to anything you may think proper to say against Captain Thornleigh.”

“I was not going to say anything against him,” said poor Edward, humbly ; “at least, nothing that you would consider as against him.”

“No ; you would only have said that he is wild, profligate, and heartless, and that I am a fool to trust him.”

“I do not deny your accusation ; but remember that it is by you the words have been spoken, while I—— : but no, I am only too thankful to be spared the pain of uttering disagreeable truths.”

The last words were scarcely audible ; and then, not daring to look into her grieved or angry eyes, he bent his own upon the ground, and with wandering nervous fingers plucked the grass that grew there.

“Eddy,” said Helen, after a pause (during which a glance at his sad face had a little softened her feelings towards her Mentor)—“Eddy, forgive me. I did not mean to vex you. But tell me,—oh, do tell me !—what you meant when you said that I—that I—loved Captain Thornleigh ;” and the crimson tide rushed to her cheek and brow.

Edward’s thoughts meanwhile had wandered from the subject, in which she evidently took so deep an interest ; and thus the exordium to his reply was singularly ill-timed and unacceptable.

“Helen,” he began in stammering accents, “you do not know how dear you are to me.”

“Oh, don’t talk of that,” interrupted the girl, impatiently ; “don’t talk nonsense.”

“Well, I won’t,” said the poor obedient fellow ; for she was his queen, and he, loving her without hope of reward, was as the most lowly of humble servants at her feet. “I will say nothing of myself ; but you should know, indeed you should, that every one is talking of you.”

The truth was out now ; and the woman’s wrath blazed forth.

“Every one !” she cried ; “and who—if I may be permitted to ask—is ‘every one’? Who has presumed to talk of Captain Thornleigh’s attentions and of my feelings ?”

She was very angry—so angry that it may be doubted whether some long-rankling feeling were not at work within her, aiding by its stingings the indignation called up by Edward’s words. Her cousin noticed the signs of the gathering tempest, and stood prepared, with what courage he could assume, to bear its brunt.

“Nellie,” he said gently, “your father’s profession is also mine, and therefore you cannot accuse me of an intention to disparage either the calling, or those who exercise it. But,

young as you may in every respect deem me, I have not now to learn in what light men like Thornleigh view the pretty daughters of a country surgeon. A *fair* field for *sport* you are, dear Nellie,—sport to *them*, but a fearful death indeed to you."

"Death!" exclaimed the girl, with a laugh. "Look at me; do I seem likely to die, either of love or of a broken heart?"

"I do not speak of that—God forbid I should! But there is such a thing as a blasted name, and such a tragedy as a murdered reputation. There are women who look on at such catastrophes with a strange and morbid pleasure, forgetting that in the cold element of what is called 'society' there is many a sinking being who would, perchance, gladly catch at a straw to save herself from ruin, but who looks in vain for a kindly hand extended for her rescue."

"And instead, they push her back into the current," said Helen, with increasing anger. "But you have not yet told me by whom and of what I am accused; you have not divulged the names of those whose hands, far from rescuing, are already filled with stones to cast at me."

Edward's answer was given frankly and at once; for he was rejoiced to find that she was a true woman still, and shrank instinctively from public scandal.

"Who are they, and what do they insinuate? Well, you shall know the truth. They say that you meet Thornleigh alone, and at undue hours; and I say, dear Helen, that this is only too true, and that your danger is very great."

"And so, my good respectable cousin, you have been playing the worthy part of a spy upon my actions, and following my steps when I foolishly imagined I was alone? God forgive me for my stupidity and blindness, but I had been really weak enough to fancy that you were above such tricks as these."

Her words, and the laugh that accompanied them, were so taunting and bitter, that for a passing moment Edward's anger was almost equal to her own; but his old love, and the soft pity he felt for her, acted like oil upon the waters, and stilled the waves of anger in his breast.

"Helen, you wrong me," he said; "and the time will, I trust, come when your judgment will be more impartial and more just. But enough of my conduct and motives, which are as nothing when compared with the peril in which you are placed. Would that I could spare you the pain of listening to

what my duty tells me I must make known to you ; but, alas ! it is impossible, for the whole town is talking of your meetings with Thornleigh ; the merest gossips prate over the pleasant news ; every chattering shop-girl has her stone ready to throw at you ; and in the mess-room——”

“The mess-room ! Oh, Edward, surely you would not allow——”

“Helen, you know nothing of these things ; and you have yet to learn that one half of the world takes delight in slandering, and the other in believing to the uttermost the vile things they hear. What can I do to stem a torrent so mighty and so overwhelming ? Your own prudence should have guarded the sluice-gates, which, alas ! are wide open now, and so have saved you from this heavy blow. In such a place, too !—a place where so many idle men are, like Thornleigh, going about in search of prey !”

“And you, when you made the notable discovery which has brought you here to preach to me to-day, what were you doing, and what led you to lonely places, and to lanes where lovers meet at dusk ? Fie, Cousin Edward ! you whom I thought so ‘steady’ and respectable, to be wandering about——”

“Nay, I was there to *watch*——”

“And not to *prey*—unworthy joke,” interrupted Helen, laughing awkwardly to hide her confusion.

“Believe me that so profane a jest was far from my thoughts, which indeed are sad enough just now. I leave with the detachment to-morrow, dear cousin, and who can say how long we may be separated ? It is with deep sorrow that I bid you farewell ; for you have no protector, and are in the power of a man whom I believe to be totally unscrupulous and devoid of principle. Helen, my own dear cousin, my first friend ! may I ask you one question before I go hence—never, perhaps, to look upon your sweet face again ?”

“How foolish you are, Edward ! Of course you can ask me a question ; nay, more, I promise to answer it.”

The words were lightly spoken, but their bantering tone was assumed to hide the heaviness which her cousin’s earnest appeal had laid upon her heart.

“Then tell me, Helen,” he continued, and again he feared to meet her eyes—“tell me if Thornleigh has ever spoken to you of marriage.”

“Never,” was the unhesitating reply ; “nor do I think him

a likely man to marry. Such an idea never seems to occur to him."

"Then, in the name of Heaven, how is all this to end?" exclaimed Burrowes, starting up impetuously.

"How is what to end?" asked the girl, as simply and quietly as though she had no important or individual interest in the reply.

"Why this intimacy; this—this—love-making, these secret assignations, which are making your name a byword, and casting a blight upon your beauty and your fair fame?"

"And pray who has given you a right to watch over my actions?" cried Helen. "I am not alone in the world, I have a father to protect, and a mother to advise me; and—and—I am fully capable of taking care of myself."

"No, Helen, far from capable. Why, how fast your heart beats now! I see that golden gift of his, that hangs upon your neck, vibrating to its swift action; and your eyes flash far too proudly. No, Nellie, the spirit within is under no control, and you are at once too impetuous and too tender to be trusted to your own guardianship alone."

"My heart beats, but it is with anger; and as for pride, why that should be my safeguard, you foolish boy!"

"It should be, but I fear it will prove but a stumbling-block in your path. Do you imagine, dear cousin, that I am blind and deaf to what is passing around me? Why, I marked the very glance which gave to Thornleigh his first hope to win you. Do you recollect the day, Helen? Or have you forgotten the studied slight and cruel sneer that galled you so bitterly, when Anna Talmash, in her envy of your beauty, levelled sarcasms at you and yours?"

"Have I forgotten it? No; the blow was too hard, and was felt the more acutely, because (invulnerable as she seemed) I was powerless to return it."

"Poor child!" said Edward, sadly; "the mischief was begun then. Yes, from that hour I date it all."

"True—most true," mused Helen; "and it was my first real fault, if fault it can be called, to show the deep love in my heart that day. Often and often had we talked and laughed together, happily and carelessly; for you know, Eddy, how agreeable he is, and how far above other men in every way."

Edward winced a little at this unqualified assertion, but he bore his mental torture as bravely as though he had been a woman.

“And then,” continued she, unmindful of the pain she had inflicted, “it is so hard to bear rudeness, especially from those who once liked me, and were kind to me. Edward, what can have changed the Talmashes so greatly, for they seem to hate me now? If you had but known them when their poor young brother lived! Dear little Ernest! he had such a beautiful face, with a colour like a crimson rose, and eyes so large and loving; but the little darling died, for he was too pure and good for earth, and now he is an angel in heaven, watching—at least he said he would—for the time when I should join him there; but that will never be—never!” and she sighed dejectedly.

“My darling Nellie!—”

But the girl hastily interrupted him; for, dreading her cousin’s return to the topic of Captain Thornleigh’s attentions, she strove to prolong the momentary respite by reverting to other themes and to distant memories of the past.

“How absurd,” she continued, “to talk of all this now! But I meant to say that the Talmashes were fond enough of me three years ago, and greatly pleased that I should spend so much of my time by the side of the suffering child, reading to him, and drawing figures of strange monsters with my childish fingers; and now they hate me, and seem as much afraid of coming in contact with my unfortunate person as though I carried about with me as many fevers as my father gives physic for. What is the harm of being a doctor, Eddy? A doctor is a gentleman, at least I am sure my father is; and yet every one makes a difference between us and other people.”

“What sort of difference, Nellie, and who makes it?”

“Oh, every one, almost. But never mind; I only care just at the moment; afterwards I know it is not worth thinking about. But I was mortified; there were so many that heard the remarks made by that odious girl: and then every one thinks so much of Captain Thornleigh, and the temptation was great to show that he, at least, did not despise me. Since that day I have seen him much more frequently; and indeed, Eddy, I have grown to like him,—I mean, to love him—very much;” and a tear fell on the kind hand that had taken hers, and was pressing it fondly.

“My poor little cousin,” he said gently, “with my whole heart I feel for you; but believe me that the more you love this man, the more urgent is the necessity for your parting

from him for ever. You say yourself that he entertains no thought of marriage, and——”

“Nay, dear Edward,” said Helen imperatively, “you don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Not know what I am talking about!—not know that marriage is the only fitting reparation for the injury done to a woman’s reputation,—the only proper end of——”

“Improper beginnings,” said Helen, laughing. “My dear Eddy, you are everything that is wise, virtuous, and discreet, and I am going to shock you beyond measure; but the real fact is, that I consider the ceremony of marriage as one of the most absurd inventions ever inflicted on human beings by mortal men.”

“My dear Helen!” began Edward; but his astonishment was too great for words or argument.

“Yes, I do think it an absurdity,” continued she eagerly. “In the first place, I deny the right of man to make impossible laws, and then declare that God will punish with everlasting burning the man who breaks one jot or tittle of them.”

“But what are the impossible laws contained in the marriage service of the Church?” broke in Edward, humouring what he mentally termed the folly of her fancy.

“All, or at least almost all, that they contain,” answered Helen. “In the first place, do we not swear to love always and to the end, when to do so is too often clearly and simply out of our power? Is human love the growth of human will? Certainly not; and as certainly is it only as words of course that we vow to ‘honour and to obey’ the man, who may turn out a dishonourable wretch, or a monster of tyranny and oppression.”

“But, Nellie, you have passed over in silence the solemn words which bind together those whom God will not have put asunder. Surely you do not consider that oath as impossible to keep—surely you do not deem that vow ridiculous?”

“Ridiculous! No, indeed; but be assured that the everyday and commonplace breaking of one portion of the oath renders the keeping of the rest infinitely less likely than it otherwise would be. ‘In for a penny, in for a pound,’ is a vulgar proverb, but not the less true for that.”

“Nellie, where did you learn all this worldly wisdom?” asked Edward, sadly.

“By looking about me and keeping my eyes open, I suppose” was the careless answer. “But you need not look so horrified, for you would be a little surprised if you knew the awful vow *I* would administer to ‘persons about to marry.’ I would leave out all the nonsense ; but such an anathema as I would call down on the heads of those who were false and untrue, and who did not keep themselves wholly unto the husband or wife who trusted them,—such an anathema, I say, should be pronounced as would make the walls of God’s house ring again !”

“You are a strange girl,” said Edward, after a pause, “and have imbibed some curious notions.”

“Have I ? They seem simple enough to me, for I would have the dictates of honour and our duty to God go hand-in-hand to save us from temptation ; while the code established by society has decided differently, proving that under the influence of that detestable and venal jurisdiction, men and women learn to forget that a promise is a sacred thing, whether it be whispered softly and registered on the inmost heart, or spoken aloud before a priest, and recorded in the pages of the vestry-book.”

“Helen, your words alarm me. I know not how far the judgment I once thought so clear may have been perverted, or the purity that *was* so stainless been contaminated by the breath of evil principles ; but *this* I know, that if you listen longer to the man who, for the attainment of his own selfish ends, is endeavouring thus to confuse your notions of right and wrong, you are lost for ever !”

“You narrow-minded and most prejudiced of all good, anxious cousins !” was Helen’s laughing reply to this outburst ; “what can I have said to call forth such a formidable prophecy, or to inspire such a dismal foreboding of evil to come ?”

“Not much, perhaps, after all, dear Helen,” he replied with an effort at cheerfulness ; “and may God grant that the shadow which is casting all around me into gloom be not that of the *one* event which on earth I most dread ! But now, dearest Nellie, that the time has come for us to part, have you no word of comfort for me—no promise that will send me forth on my distant journey with a lighter heart ? We have been friends from childhood ; surely you will not quite neglect my counsels, or deem them entirely unworthy of a place in your

memory, when seas will roll between us, and when my warning voice will be no longer heard ?”

But Helen would promise nothing that might entail upon her a separation from the man she loved ; and so the last farewells were embittered by apparent coldness, though deep sorrow was lying at the bottom of each faithful heart, and though both were inwardly longing to change the cold “Good-bye” and the conventional “hand-shake” for the warm embrace, and dear, “God bless you !” that would be as a soothing balm to them in after years.

But Edward’s services for his cousin were not yet at an end ; for, after a fruitless attempt to see and remonstrate with the man whose influence over her appeared to him so baneful, he spent the greater part of the night in the concoction of a letter, from the perusal of which he was absurdly hopeful that good results would ensue. And absurd indeed that letter was, and showing in its blind confidence an ignorance of the force of human passion, which called up a smile on the lips of the man to whom the appeal was made. But nevertheless the letter was a good letter,—frank, outspoken, and gentlemanlike in its tone, and appealing forcibly to many a good and honourable feeling.

When Philip Thornleigh read it, the writer was already far away, having departed the week before for India ; leaving the girl he loved without a champion (for an appeal to her absorbed and business-loving father would have been utterly futile), and with no rampart to guard her stronger than the innate purity of her own heart.

The young surgeon was as little justified in his remark that Philip Thornleigh had laid a deliberate plan to draw Helen into his power, as the latter was right in her assertion that the idea of marrying her had never for a moment occurred to him. Struck with sudden admiration for her rich gift of beauty, he was not slow in discovering qualities, both of heart and mind, which kept up the interest excited by her loveliness ; and, the opportunities of improving his acquaintance with her being frequent, can it be wondered at that he availed himself of them to the utmost ? Nor was he one likely to fail in exciting reciprocal feelings in the breast of any woman whose love he sought to win. Though not eminently handsome, he had in his person an air of great distinction, and there was in his manner a sort of indolent *insouciance* that was not without its

charm ; but there were some strong lines in his character, and also some curious contrasting qualities ; for, though usually self-reliant, he was the very slave of his prejudices, and though remarkable for kindness of heart, and even tenderness of feeling, he was too ready to suspect those he loved, rarely forgiving any act of theirs of which he had been led to believe them capable, and of which in his heart he disapproved. He was not a great talker (few agreeable people are), but he had the power of throwing a meaning into words, and even into looks, which few possessed ; and there was a pleasant spell in the very tones of his voice, which it was difficult to resist. Beyond and above all this, it must be added that he was *true*, for no feigned passion could have carried with it the force and power which made Philip Thornleigh's entire devotion so irresistible ; and, often as he had loved, the last madness seemed, and even was, as violent as the one that had preceded it.

There is no occasion, nor would there be any advantage, in dwelling at length on this portion of poor Helen's story ; sufficient is it to say that the catastrophe came about after this wise. A large mansion, standing in the midst of a fair estate, had been for some two or three years unoccupied, though it was advantageously and pleasantly situated within a distance of two miles from Warminster and its exquisitely beautiful cathedral. About the period of Edward's departure, a small but agreeable family, consisting of a gentleman and his wife and one little boy, came to sojourn at “The Hazles.” Rich, lively, and given to hospitality, the new comers were received with open arms, and were soon universally allowed to be “great acquisitions.” The little boy was the only one of the party who did not share in the general popularity ; for he was a sickly child, occasionally interfering by his ailments with the social festivities, and being consequently looked upon as an intruder into the circles whose mirth he marred by his “*little admired disorders.*” It was the feeble condition of her only child that led to Mrs. Dormer's acquaintance with Dr. Langton, and subsequently to a still greater amount of intimacy with his daughter : for Helen was a kind and gentle nurse, fond of children, and ingenious in amusing them ; and Mrs. Dormer, pleased with her bright beauty, and grateful for the attention bestowed on her child, forgot for a moment the prejudices of *caste*, and made an *almost* friend of the Doctor's daughter. Of this somewhat incongruous intimacy the fruits

reaped by Helen and her family consisted of occasional gifts of game and grapes, and sometimes a drive with Mrs. Dormer in her hermetically-sealed chariot, with the fractious heir seated upon the girl's lap, tangling the braids of her glossy hair, and imprinting indelible creases on her silk dress.

It was early autumn now, and Helen was busy in some household work for the mother (whose failing intellect rendered her scarcely conscious by whom such offices were performed), when a knock at the door proclaimed a visitor, and Mrs. Dormer was announced. She had come, she said, to carry Helen off on a round of visits, among which was one that had been long owing on her part to Mrs. Talmash, of Dell Grange. Gladly would Helen have refused the offered civility, for she was proud, and was moreover not one of the many exceptions to the rule that “no creature smarts so little as a fool ;” nevertheless she agreed to the proposal, and evil indeed were the consequences that arose from that ill-omened visit. They shall be described in Helen's own words, when, many a year after these events took place, she told her touching story to her childhood's friend :—

“We were received,” she said, “by Mrs. Talmash and her daughter ; they were very gracious to my companion, but they looked at me—no, I cannot tell you *how* they looked ; but I felt that I grew very red and frightened, and cordially wished myself at home again. Still I made an effort at composure, saying, with a voice which I tried to render steady, ‘It is some time since we met, Miss Talmash, but I think you can hardly have quite forgotten Helen Langton.’ She made no reply ; but, after glancing at me contemptuously, turned away ; while I, shocked and ashamed (for I was anything but brave in those days), would gladly have hidden myself in the remotest corner of the earth. Well, the visit, during which I had remained silent and unnoticed, came to an end at last ; and no sooner were we seated in the carriage than Mrs. Dormer (as I expected she would do) questioned me closely concerning the rudeness with which I had been treated. What answer could I make ? Literally none, for I had not the courage to confess what I really believed to be the truth—namely, that my humble position in life rendered it necessary to disown me before richer and grander acquaintances ; and for the moment I had completely forgotten the warnings I had received that evil tongues were busy with my name. There are many truths of

which I was then ignorant—truths which contact with the world has since cruelly instructed me in ; and, in the ignorance that is weakness, I allowed myself to be overpowered and crushed. But what and who were those women by whom I had been so deeply humbled ? Of both (whether true or false no one took the trouble to inquire)—but of both, what are called ‘little stories’ had long been extant : but *they* were rich, and had powerful connections, whilst I—but I had yet to learn that ‘little stories’ become great and condemning truths when told of little people, and that while vice *is* vice in the lower ranks of society, it is rank blasphemy among the higher to call the thing by its real name. Nothing is more easy to conquer than the many-tongued and million-eyed monster called the world, if only the means be in our power. Tie up its tongues with chains of diamonds, throw gold-dust into its blinking eyes, and let the dust, too, of dead ancestors rise in clouds about the huge senseless beast, and the deed is done. This is the philosophy that the struggle of life has taught me ; but I had no such weapons when my warfare began, and so was conquered easily and at once. The remembrance of that visit haunted me for a day and night, and was then driven into the background by the near approach of a pleasure to which for weeks I had looked forward with the keenest anticipations of enjoyment. The hoped-for felicity was no less an event than the great annual Horticultural Fête and Archery Meeting combined, at which the whole county society for many a mile distant would be assembled, and to which my new acquaintance Mrs. Dormer, had promised to *chaperone* me. Never shall I forget the sensations of unmixed happiness with which I made my preparations for that day of anticipated bliss ; and when it came, bright and cloudless, not even the gorgeous sun was more brilliant than my hopes, or the breezy air more buoyant than my spirit. I had an exquisite dress, well-fitting, light, and flowing ; and my hat was a perfect triumph of art, with its wreath of ivy-leaves, and spray of lilies resting on my hair. It may seem childish to dwell upon these details ; but the memory of my dress and figure, as I saw myself in the glass that morning, is so twined in with my last thoughts of home, with its peaceful associations and simple pleasures, that I cannot separate them, burthened with bitterness and self-reproach as those memories are. But I must return to my story.

“I was dressed, and ready for departure, when, instead of the carriage which I had been anxiously expecting, a note was brought me from Mrs. Dormer, the purport of which was to excuse her attendance. The wording of the epistle was not uncourteous. She feared, she wrote, that at the last moment she might be prevented from calling for me, and therefore hoped I should be able to find some other friend to perform the office she was reluctantly obliged to forego. I was disappointed, but being; unfortunately, wholly unconscious that the words I read were merely a conglomeration of conventional falsehoods, I persevered in my intention of being present at the fête. Luckily (at least I deemed it so then, for my whole heart was bent upon the expedition), the Archery Ground lay in the way of my father’s daily round of visits ; and nothing doubting that, once there, I should find no lack of friends, I persuaded him to allow me to accompany him. We arrived, and my father, being as usual steeped in business cares, hastened away, leaving his hapless daughter alone in the crowded assembly. The first person on whom my eyes rested was Mrs. Dormer,—but Mrs. Dormer with a cold *company* face which I had never seen her wear before, and with eyes which turned from mine as though she saw me not. I looked around, and the same chill stare was everywhere ; nor could I escape it, for I was surrounded by those countless eyes which glared around me like bad faces in a dream. Alone, then, I stood in that circle of cruel women : for they *were* cruel,—ay, cruel as the Indians who gather around their victims to mark how the tortures they inflict are borne. I gave no sign of mine, but I think that if one of those who caused them could have looked into my heart, and seen how it was wrung, she would have pitied me !

“I wandered about in my gay gala-dress, pale and nervous, but beautiful—at least men told me so. Once I should have been indignant at such fulsome compliments, and shocked at the fixed and insolent gaze with which they were accompanied ; but now, deserted by my own sex, I was fain to seek companionship with the other, for I was not bold enough to face those pitiless women alone. At last Thornleigh came, and I flew to him—I felt I did—like a wounded bird. All day he was by my side, and at night, when together we left that scene where I had so sorely suffered—that night I, grown reckless and despairing, laid my head upon his breast, and promised to be his ! The morning came, and brought with it no better or

safer reasoning : for in the future I saw nothing but an unbearable existence of humiliation and wretchedness. I was guiltless of aught more blameable than girlish folly, and I was already condemned as a woman abandoned to her evil passions, and lost to all sense of shame. What wonder then that, destitute of a protector, and being but a poor and timid girl, my heart sank within me, and that I utterly rejected the idea of sojourning among those who contemned and slighted me ? What wonder that, abandoned to the leadings of my own wild will, I should have resolved to seek a happier lot elsewhere ? What were home and parents to me,—or, rather, what was I to them ? The thought of parting from my father hardly cost me a pang ; and if I suffered a tinge of regret at deserting my poor ailing mother, the feeling was but momentary, and all insufficient to turn me from my purpose.

“Trifling, indeed, had been the part they had played in the short opening portion of my life’s drama, and now I was preparing to act out the play in other scenes, and before a different audience. Even now, when I look back upon my flight, I cannot feel that I was heartless or undutiful in keeping my promise, as I did steadily and unswervingly, to Thornleigh ; but here I must assure you, that it was not the force of overpowering passion for him which led me from what is called the ‘path of duty,’ but rather the thorns strewn by *women* in that path, and which made it so hard to tread. I do not attempt to justify either myself, or any of the many fallen creatures who err as I did ; but of this I am persuaded, that many a woman sins for want of encouragement to be good, and that, if you could look back into the early history of many of *us*, you would see that, in more ways than I can reckon, women are women’s worst enemies ; that they have powerful auxiliaries in our own vanity and folly, and in the strength of our own passions, is a truth which I cannot venture to deny.”

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## CHAPTER IV

“Oh, love may venture in  
Where it daurna weel be seen.”

“The heart’s aye the part aye  
That makes it right or wrang.”—BURNS.

FIVE years had now passed away—years that had changed nothing in the lot of Helen Langton, or, rather, of Helen Vaughan, for she had adopted the surname of a distant relative. At three-and-twenty she was still happy, still unrepentant, and, if possible, handsomer than ever. This description of a woman’s state when she has defied the laws of God and man, may, we fear, be deemed detrimental to the cause of morality, but it is nevertheless true (in some degree) to nature. It has been said, by one who knew that nature well, that *Le remords est né de l’abandon, et non pas de la faute*; and it may be that had Helen’s lover relaxed in his devoted attentions (showing her thereby that his passion was diminished, and that he had grown weary of her society), we should not now have to record the fact that her gay spirits had not flagged, and that her bright loveliness was not shorn of a single beam.

Those five years had been passed far away from England; and under the burning sun of India, and in the almost solitude of a bungalow, the erring woman had nearly ceased to think of a country where the deed that she had done would (and that justly) exclude her from the society of the respected and the virtuous.

Helen’s character and disposition rendered her fully equal to the emergency in which she was placed—the emergency, namely, of being a man’s almost sole companion through many a month, which but for her society would have been tedious in the extreme. She was a very pleasant creature, variable in her words, with all a woman’s pretty art of strewing flowers on the path that time treads then so noiselessly, and with

only such fitful gleams of her strong love for Philip, as made him prize the gift the more from his great fear that one day the rich blessing might be withdrawn from him. Her beauty, maintained by unfailing health and nerves that never flagged, was a source of great pride to Thornleigh, who secretly delighted in the envying admiration bestowed upon her; while Helen, gifted with a more than due proportion of female tact and discrimination, was not slow to learn that, so long as the cravings of a man's vanity are satisfied, there is no danger of his throwing away the straw that tickles him, or of his becoming wearied of the amusement of his rattle.

But nature had designed Helen for something better than a mere plaything, nor did she contend against a destiny which suited well her vigorous character and her taste for active pursuits. Many a good deed, performed simply and unostentatiously, might have been recorded of her during those swiftly-passing years; and had the gentle and beautiful Mrs. Vaughan been a great and honourable lady, instead of the “thing” she was, her name for charity might have sounded high in the land; and so, with no craving for the praise of men, but perhaps with some vague purpose of doing penance for the life she led, Helen continued to do good by stealth—visiting the sick wives and children of the soldiers, and administering to the wants of the peevish and complaining. She reaped but small reward for the exertion, which in that enervating climate was not without its merit; for few of those whom she thus visited were inclined to show her much either of gratitude or respect, though many were the sorrows lightened by the sight of her kind face, and liberal the donations bestowed from her well-filled purse.

But in spite of, and perhaps unobservant of, the small slight which should have made her mindful of the degradation of her position, Helen persisted in the belief (benighted woman that she was!) that her sin, after all, was not so very heinous. She had learnt to draw comparisons between herself and those by whom she was tacitly bidden to stand aside, for they were holier than she; and the result was not unfrequently in her own favour. True as steel to the man to whom she had sworn to be faithful unto death, not for worlds, and (what is still more to her credit) not for any gratification of vanity or pique, would she have played upon the passions of another, nor in thought or deed have betrayed the man who trusted her. But

Helen was a keen observer, and many a slight deviation from the right path and not a few soft sins, destined to remain unwhipped of justice, were known to her when the world suspected them not ; and she, strong in her own truth, had no mercy on the lawful wives, for whose errors she saw no excuse, and by the side of whose transgressions her own appeared to her so venial. There was no one to warn the self-comforting woman of the peril attending her delusion, nor to remind her of the fearful awaking which would be hers when, among colder and more rigid moralists, she would be roughly roused from her blissful torpor ; and thus she continued in the dangerous indulgence of compounding for her sins by comparing them with transgressions which it was as much out of her power as it was against her nature to commit, and in the perilous consolation of the idea that she was far less wicked than many whom the world magnified as good.

Once Helen confided the results of her cogitations to Thornleigh, and was surprised to find that he took a lenient view of the misdemeanours on which *she* commented so severely. He even, to her dismay, went so far as to excuse them, bringing forward many an extenuating circumstance, and suggesting that, after all, it would be perhaps better to let go the scales whose “balance could not be adjusted,” and remember with charitable hearts the distich, that—

“What’s done we partly may compute,  
But know not what’s resisted.”

“But, Philip,” continued the inexorable woman, “I cannot understand your being able to find so many excellent reasons and excuses for your friends. However, in one case I defy you. Look at Mrs. Stonehurst——”

“I often do,” said Philip, with a lazy puff of smoke issuing from his lips.

“Well, what can you say for her ? If her husband were unkind, or in any way neglectful of her, I would not blame her ; but he is so good-natured, and trusts her so entirely. Really, Philip, I do believe he thinks her the best wife in the world ! How frightfully treacherous she must be !”

Thornleigh answered with a laugh, for the wife in question not being *his* wife, the idea of Helen’s “virtuous indignation” amused him ; and moreover, good-natured as he was, he found

something especially ludicrous in the idea of his friend's delusions.

“Poor fellow! Poor old Stony,” he said, when his pleasant laugh had subsided, “I only hope he won't be enlightened. He's always so jolly——”

But when, after a few minutes' pause, Helen expressed to Philip her opinion of mercenary marriages in general, and of one in particular which at that moment was occupying public attention, she was agreeably surprised to find that his ideas (for, like most men, he had a yearning to be loved for himself alone) coincided with her own. Together they inveighed against the perjured ones who vowed a love they could not feel, and who, to make the “nauseous draught of life go down,” consoled themselves with the pearls and the diamonds that lay at the bottom of the cup; and when their vituperations were at an end, and the force of language could no further go, Helen, turning a look of love and pride on the handsome figure by her side, whispered—

“There is one thing that comforts me, Philip, and that is, that I at least have not sold myself. Oh! the lies,” she added, “that I have seen looked out of young girls' eyes, and that, too, on men who should not have touched my ungloved hand in common courtesy!”

“Why, you foolish woman,” said Philip, smiling at the energy with which she poured forth her reminiscences, “don't you know there is such a thing as being more nice than wise?”

“Notions of honour cannot be too nice—can they, Philip?” she asked; but he made no reply, for it was not for him to talk to *her* of honour.

Helen sighed. “Perhaps,” she continued, “I am wrong to talk of such things, for had I been tempted, I too might have fallen. But still I *think* I could not have purchased money or high position by the sacrifice of my self-esteem and my sense of honour. Tell me that I am an honourable woman—tell me that you think so, Philip;” and she looked at him with pleading eyes.

Thornleigh stroked her dark hair fondly. “Honourable to me, dear love. But the world, my Helen——”

“Ah! the world,” she cried impatiently. “*Your* world—*your* god: mine is truth and honour.”

“Raise an altar to the unknown deities,” said Philip, with a languid smile. “But, seriously, I think you are rather too

hard upon poor Mrs. Stonehurst.” He was lying idly on a couch, smoking and *sangareeing* away the broiling midday hours. “She is a deuced pretty woman, and old Stony is a bore. Now, Nelly, you must allow that.”

Helen would not deny the fact, but nevertheless she was not to be laughed out of her opinion that, as long as a husband performs his part of the social compact, his wife, if she break hers, is utterly without excuse, and should be held up to general reprobation. “And as to a man’s being a bore,” she mentally added, “why, every one is tiresome occasionally. Even Philip is not always so agreeable as he was before we”— married was the word her thoughts uttered ; and surely few wives, whose vows had been spoken in Holy Church, could have felt more certain than did Helen that her lot in life was fixed beyond the possibility of change.

Among those with whom Mrs. Vaughan sometimes came in contact, and that principally by the bedside of the sick, must be mentioned the garrison chaplain (Mr. Fanshawe by name), whose office naturally led him to where sin and sorrow did most abound. He was a very average man, that military parson—one of the million mediocrities of the earth ; but he was a kind man at heart, and being generally denominated “a good fellow” by the youngsters in the regiment, it may be inferred that his sermons were short, and his advice not often forced upon them. The Chaplain’s manner to Helen was civil in the extreme, and whatever surprise he might have felt when, on the first occasion of his meeting with her, she knelt in prayer beside the dying, was carefully concealed. Perhaps, aided by the solemnity of the scenes they witnessed together, and strengthened by the power of his sacred office, a more earnest man might have succeeded in arousing her to a sense of her delinquencies ; but the conversion of such a sinner was not in Mr. Fanshawe’s line, nor was he rash enough to risk his popularity with the Colonel (for Thornleigh commanded the regiment then) by a vain effort at interference with his pleasures. So Helen was left to her sins, and the Chaplain retained the good word of the thoughtless boys, which he prized far more highly than it deserved, and was made happy by the occasional notice of Thornleigh, who pronounced him to be a gentlemanly fellow, who never took liberties, or degraded his cloth and himself by acts of licentiousness.

Meanwhile Helen, though armed by the “strong breastplate

of a heart untainted,” was not altogether invulnerable; and there came a time when an arrow struck her in the joints of her armour, piercing her keenly.

About six months previous to the time when a change of prospects at home rendered it inexpedient for Colonel Thornleigh to remain any longer in India, the event occurred which, while it revealed to Helen the full view of her position, was not without its influence on her future life.

Instances of homicidal mania caused by excessive drinking are, unfortunately, of no unfrequent occurrence amongst soldiers, one cause of them possibly being, that the men often retain in the bewilderment of intoxication a confused sense of the injuries, real or imaginary, which when sober they had forgiven and almost forgotten. Of the truth of this remark a soldier belonging to Colonel Thornleigh’s regiment afforded a fearful example; for after a recent punishment, and when maddened by arrack and heat, he one evening, without any apparent provocation, shot a sergeant belonging to the same corps, and wounded him mortally. On hearing of the occurrence, and being aware that the tragedy was deepened by the fact that the wounded man had a wife and family dependent on his exertions, Helen hastened to the scene, though dreading the melancholy sight of the bereaved woman’s despair and of the poor orphans’ tears: and sad, indeed, was the spectacle that presented itself to her view—so sad that even her strong nerves wellnigh failed her as she looked upon it!

The uncontrolled and angry grief of the wife found vent in loud hysterical screams, mingled with such fierce imprecations on the assassin, that those who stood around felt that the soldier would have a sharp struggle for his life should he venture within the grasp of those wildly-tossing arms. The sight thrilled its spectators with horror, for the “decency of woe” was wholly wanting, though prone upon the bed lay the wounded sergeant in his death agony.

A few minutes before he breathed his last, the poor man signed for his children to be brought to him, and one by one they were led within his reach, while the youngest, a child of some few months old, was held by Helen to the lips which were already whitened by approaching dissolution. For a moment it lay with its soft cheek pressed to that of the father who had loved it so well, and then, refusing to come away, its tiny fingers clutched at something vigorously. Helen loosed

its hold, shocked and shuddering ; for the accustomed plaything that the infant's hands had grasped was no other than the grizzled hair that fell over the lip of its dead father,—the father who would never play with his little child again !

It was while busied in soothing the screaming infant that Helen became aware of the presence of a lady, whose soft lovable face was turned towards her, and who asked in the sweetest of low-toned voices if she could be of any use. To Helen, stealing as they did into the midst of that discordant din, the words sounded like music spoken—a blessed sound breaking in upon a dream of horror and of agony. Yes ; she could, indeed, be of use—that gentle woman—of use in soothing the children's sorrow, and in restoring order in that wretched room : but there were limits to their power of doing good, for the task of dealing with the widow's grief, or of mitigating the violence of her fury, proved to be wholly beyond them ; and great was their relief when the entrance of the surgeon upon the miserable scene gave promise of some amelioration in the woman's condition.

“Good God !” he exclaimed. “Mrs. Vaughan!—Miss Owen ! this is no place for you. Dead is he, poor fellow ? I knew it, for there was not a shadow of hope from the first. But, ladies, I must advise you to withdraw ; for this woman is not in a state in which you can render her any service. Come, be quiet at once and cease that howling,” he added, turning to the woman, and speaking angrily and firmly.

“Oh ! Doctor,” interposed Helen, “speak gently to her, pray, for it is not well to be harsh with her. Think only of her great affliction ; she cannot restrain herself, for she is crazed with grief.”

“Crazed with grief, madam !—not she ; we know the symptoms better. Why, the woman is dead-drunk, and smells of rum enough to knock you down. And here's the bottle,” he continued, with a sort of melancholy triumph, as he drew the evidence of his sagacity from under the woman's cot. “Here's the bottle—here's the curse ;” and he threw the noxious thing across the room with all the vigour of an angry man. It fell near the bed, and the sharp sound it made thrilled through the hearts of those who heard it, for against one who lay there dead the blow seemed levelled. Poor, long-worked, humble soldier ! No need to sympathise with your trials now, for life's hard hits fall short of you at last, and you are at peace !

Yes ; his wife's disgrace is misery no longer, and her drunken habits can anger him no more ; while the children who were his solace are hers only now,—hers to beat and swear at when the drop too much is taken,—hers to rear in habits as vicious as her own ! Poor little wretched beings ! Who on the wide earth is left to defend them—who to guide, and who to save them from pollution ?

It was with words such as these in their hearts and on their lips that Helen and her new acquaintance left that dismal barrack-room together, each now knowing who had been her fellow-worker and her sister in charity and Christian love. To Mary Owen, Helen stood revealed as the lovely sinning woman of whom she had heard, but whose face (she having recently arrived in India) she had never seen, and on whom the carefully-nurtured girl now gazed shyly and curiously, as good women are wont to do on those whose lives they cannot understand. But what were Helen's feelings when she learnt that it was the General's sister, the “Mary Owen” whose “people” lived near Thornleigh's home in distant England, with whom she had held converse as with a friend ? Strange, indeed, it was, but true, that she, of whom Philip (so little given to respect what was good or reverence what was holy) had sometimes spoken as of one but “little lower than the angels,” should have thus come in contact with her, the erring and proscribed ! And it was, therefore, with deep humility and an overpowering sense of her own unworthiness, that Helen felt her heart throb with gratitude to the gentle being, who, though herself “pure as snow” and “chaste as ice,” could yet be full of pity for the fallen, and who (and may God bless her for the deed !) had given her hand to Helen as though she had been a sister.

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## CHAPTER V

"I am a woman  
More sinned against than sinning."

"The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to scourge us."—KING LEAR.

"HARVEY, I made a new acquaintance yesterday—one that I found in poor Sergeant Jones's room ; and who do you think it was ?"

The question was asked by Mary Owen of her brother the General, as they two were riding out together in the cool evening air.

"Upon my life I can't guess, but some missionary fellow, I should imagine. It is a great mistake, Mary, your going to such places, and I wish you would give it up. Caroline [he was speaking of his wife now] is very nearly as absurd, only just now she has something else to do."

"Yes, Caroline would have felt so sorry for the babies ; and two of them were such little things. I wish you could have seen them, Harvey."

"I'm uncommon glad I didn't," growled the General.

"Well—but, Harvey dear, I haven't told you the news yet ;" and she glanced at him furtively, as though half fearing the effect her frankness might produce. "It was such a beautiful woman that I saw there ; and you cannot think how good she seemed, and how tender. I could love her with all my heart."

"I have no doubt you could," responded the General. "You are always in extremes, always loving something or somebody ; but pray, who is your new friend ?"

"Now, Harvey, please not to be angry : I am half afraid you will be when you hear that it was Mrs. Vaughan who——"

"Mrs. Vaughan !" broke in the General, suddenly checking his horse in the extremity of his surprise and indignation. "Mrs. Vaughan ! Impossible ! You must be mistaken ; she never could have dared——"

“Dared what, dear Harvey?” she asked, interrupting him gently. “She only dared to perform a duty from which many a woman would have shrunk back in disgust and dismay. She closed that poor man’s eyes, brother, when he was no more, and (harder trial still) defended the unhappy children from the blows of their violent drunken mother, awing and controlling her. Oh! indeed, she was brave and good, and—I can never cease to admire and respect her;” but the last words were spoken to her own heart whisperingly.

The General was somewhat moved, stern man as he was, and rigorously as he maintained his watch over his womankind.

“I am very sorry, Mary,” he said in a kinder tone, “very sorry indeed that you should have fallen in with and spoken to this person. However, that cannot now be undone, and I can only strongly advise you to say nothing about the affair to Duncan; for if you do, there’ll be a row, I suspect.”

“But I have no secrets from Duncan,” said Mary quietly, but with a pleasant confidence; for the said Duncan was her affianced husband, and the man whom, after a betrothal of many a year, she had left her home in England to make happy at last. Mary’s girlhood had passed away, and a few silver lines might be traced on her braided hair, while on that middle-aged soldier’s brow, time and care and foreign service had drawn many a deepening furrow; but for all this their hearts were full of hope, and the Indian summer of their souls was bright with glowing colours.

“Well, do as you like,” said Mary’s brother, beginning to tire of the subject; “you know your own affairs best; only, pray let me hear no more of Mrs. Vaughan from you, for really you ought to know better than to talk of that class of women.”

A day or two elapsed before Mary Owen found an opportunity of consulting Major Duncan as to the expediency of her again visiting the place where she might possibly come in contact with the tabooed woman; and great was her delight when, instead of combating her wishes, he, in spite of the General’s lingering remonstrances, pronounced all she did and said to be wise, discreet, and praiseworthy.

Meanwhile Helen had not ceased from her errands of mercy, and might have been daily found in the lowly dwelling where that singular and most incongruous fellowship had first commenced. She had given money, and been thanked for it, and

had bestowed advice and sympathy, which had been tolerated ; moreover, as the widow had, by dint of strenuous exertions, been kept for several days from any indulgence in her besetting sin, Helen rejoiced greatly in the reformation she had worked.

A few days after the sergeant's death, Mrs. Vaughan and Mary Owen met again, and this time on the threshold of the room whose inmates they were come to visit. Their greeting was cordial, nay, almost affectionate ; and Helen, ere they entered, imparted to the General's sister her satisfaction in the belief that reformation had commenced, and that gratitude for all that had been done for her was strong and deep in the breast of the bereaved woman.

The room was still and desolate enough now : for there was no dead husband on the soldier's bed, and the children, sickly and subdued, were crouching about, watching the almost dreaded mother, who was mending their poor clothes and pondering on her own unhappy future. She rose at the approach of the ladies, and dropped a curtsey in honour of the General's sister ; but to Helen she showed no token of respect. Mary looked from one to the other in surprise, waiting in vain for the symptoms of gratitude on which Mrs. Vaughan had enlarged, and almost doubting (so great was the change wrought in the woman's manner) whether it were indeed the sergeant's widow who stood before them. Helen remained passive, though the blood had mounted to her cheek and brow ; and it was by Mary that the embarrassing silence was at length broken.

“Well, Mrs. Jones,” began the sweet musical voice that Helen loved to hear, “I am very glad to see you better. Mrs. Vaughan has given me an excellent account of you, and I hope all will now go well with you and with your children.”

“Indeed, ma'am,” responded the widow in doleful accents, “I'm very poorly, very poorly. She may tell you as I'm better, but what does the likes of her know what it is to lose a good husband ? And a good husband he was to me, though I says it ; and he to be taken from me all on a sudden like!—” and the ready apron was lifted to her eyes. “They do say he'll be hanged, the man as did it, milady, which I'll go to see, God willing :” and wiping her eyes she cast them up to heaven, as though grateful for the grace that had been given her, and to the inspiration by which she had been led to utter a sentiment so pious.

Helen was shocked at her tone, and ventured upon a remonstrance. “Mrs. Jones,” she said firmly, “we know how sorely you have been tried, and can scarcely wonder that you find it difficult to forgive; but will you not try to remember that the man who has done you this great wrong is in the hands of God, to punish or to pardon, and that there is one excuse which might (at least with you) be brought forward in his favour,—namely, that the wretched man had been drinking to excess, and could scarcely be deemed accountable for the act of which he now (as I am told) ‘sincerely repents?’”

“And pray, what odds is that to me?” said the woman, sharply. “His sorrow won’t give me back my man, or put bread into the children’s mouths.”

There was so much of disrespect conveyed in the tone in which these words were said, and the woman’s manner when speaking to Helen was so far from deferential, that the latter, angry and abashed, rose from her seat, determined no longer to endure a mortification so unlooked for and unmerited. Before, however, she could put her design into execution, the widow’s whining voice was heard again.

“I suppose I’ll have to go home, milady,” she said, again addressing Miss Owen; “and I hope as you’ll be so good to give me a character, for to service I must go, and leave the poor blessed children with my mother. Mother’s a poor woman like myself, ma’am, but respectable. We always kept ourselves respectable at the worst of times, milady, and I wouldn’t have you to think that I ever keep company with them as wasn’t,” and a sagacious look at Helen gave point to the last remark.

It was then that the sharp pang of shame shot through the heart of that hapless creature—then that no veil seemed thick enough to hide her degradation, and conceal the blushes on her guilty face. Why, even that drunken, graceless woman had a right to despise and rebuke her, for she, at least, had been a wedded wife, and was now a widow indeed.

Mary noted the struggle in her breast, and heard the convulsive sob that rose in the fair round throat, bent low in the depth of her humiliation. It was a piteous sight, and drawing her gently away, she tried to soothe her with kindly spoken words.

“Poor thing, poor thing!” she said, repeating the pitying exclamation again and again, as, standing beneath the wide

verandah, she softly pressed the hand that lay so passively within her own. Helen sobbed bitterly at first, greatly to the distress of her companion, who felt (and truly felt) that the tears of a woman who is not given to weeping, are as painful to witness, and seem to afford as little relief as those which, wrung from the eyes of stalwart men, fall in ungenial and unrefreshing showers. At length she contrived to stammer out a few words of apology.

“I am so sorry—I am not often so foolish—pray forgive me, it was your kindness——” and the tears broke forth afresh.

“What can I do for you?” asked Mary; “shall I take you home? My brother’s carriage is waiting for me, and we can go together.”

“Take *me* home?” said Helen, in undisguised amazement. “Do you know who and what I am?”

“I know you are unhappy; I know that you have been striving to do good. I am sure you wish to be good yourself,” added Mary, kindly.

“It is too late,” said Helen, mournfully. “Many a day too late :” and she repeated the words with touching emphasis.

“Oh, do not say so; it is never too late to give up what is wrong! I am very bold to talk thus to you, but——”

“*You* bold! you speak like an angel from Heaven; and oh, may I cease to live when I forget your words and looks this day. You have put new thoughts into my heart; and the time may come, when I can prove to you that I am not utterly hardened. But do not speak of me. Forget that you have met me here, for the judgments of the world are merciless, and ill-nature can draw poison from the sweetest flower. We may never meet again; but if, in after years, one thought of her whom fate has set so far apart, should cross your sinless memory, think of her as one who had known sorrow and suffered wrong, and from the light of your happy home, look with pity on the gloomy picture of the castaway.”

“Indeed, I feel for you,” said Mary, whose tears could with difficulty be repressed. “But do not speak so hopelessly. You are young, and God has put good thoughts into your heart. Do not resist them, but fly at once from temptation, and you will find peace at last.”

“I cannot; *he* has been very good to me; and he is all I have.”

Mary was silenced, for she thought of her own Duncan

and found no words to strengthen her arguments in favour of the course she counselled ; and so they parted, not to meet again for years, not to meet again till many a fresh sorrow had been measured out to each ; purifying the heart of the one, and rendering the other a still more meet inheritor of her Father’s kingdom.

But while the wheels of old Time’s chariot had for Helen sped with such noiseless swiftness, they had gone over rough and stony roads with those she had left behind her. Stationed many hundred miles apart, it had so happened that, during their joint sojourn in India, Helen and her cousin Edward had never met, though sundry letters had passed between them, by means of which the former had been made aware of the various events that had occurred in her family.

Her brother Robert lay in an unhonoured and a forgotten grave ; for he had died the death of the dissipated, and left few to mourn his end. From one of the many haunts of vice, frequented by reckless and desperate youths, the body of a man, white and miserably attenuated, was one day brought on the shoulders of hired attendants to a West End London hospital. A few short hours more, and the wretched burthen having ceased to be a living thing, a verdict of “natural death from epilepsy” was returned by the jury, who had been summoned to “sit” upon that ruined remnant of mortality.

They may have been right (those men who knew so little), but the old Doctor (far though he was from that dismal inquest-room) knew the cause of his boy’s death better, and sorrowed for it heavily. Then other changes came, changes which led to a distaste for the old house that had been *his* father’s, and for the home which death had made desolate ; and so, before the grass had time to flourish on the grave of the long complaining wife (the listening to whose daily complaints had grown to be almost a necessary habit of his existence), the Doctor decided on breaking up his establishment, giving up “business,” and with his only remaining son falling back upon the doubtful pleasures of “private life.”

In a new home, far removed from that which he had so long called his, and in the enforced idleness of his present position, it was difficult to drive away the thoughts (not unmixed with their due portion of self-accusation) that crowded upon him : and many a rousing memory of the daughter he had so lightly valued, forced itself upon his notice ; for alone with his self-

upbraidings he had, in the weakness of his advancing years, no courage to cope with the foes his accusing conscience brought in array against him.

Then came illness, the first his iron frame had known, and the neighbours, ready as neighbours ever are to anticipate the worst, pronounced that the old man was “breaking.” And so in truth he was, but the breaking crushed the bitterness from his heart, and ere his summons came, he wrote a letter full of tenderness to Helen ; a letter in which pardon for *her* fault was mingled with self-reproach for the neglect which had been its cause.

The letter was sent to Edward Burrowes to forward to his cousin, but when the missive reached the distant station where Helen had so longed for one remembering word from those she had forsaken, the erring daughter was no longer there. She had sailed with Philip Thornleigh to England ; and many a month had passed away, and the old man was in his grave, when his daughter at last read the words which told she was forgiven.

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## CHAPTER VI.

“ We are blushing roses  
Bending with our fulness,  
'Midst our close-capp'd sister buds  
Warming the green coolness.

“ Hold one of us lightly—  
See from what a slender  
Stalk we bow'r in heavy blossoms,  
And roundness rich and tender.”—LEIGH HUNT.

IT was a dreary day in January, and land and sea were obscured by heavy storms of sleet and snow, which fell in unbroken violence from the leaden-coloured sky. On the waves of the wind-tossed Solent, a large ship, with troops on board, and with many a reef in her tempest-worn sails, was to be seen battling her way towards Spithead. On that ship weather-beaten mariners on the shore fixed their eyes curiously, spying at her through glasses all bespotted with the driving snow, and pronouncing various opinions on the name and

nature of the new arrival. It was a cold welcome home, and a cheerless prospect for those who, during many a year (while baking under Indian suns), had been longing for and “babbling of green fields” at home ; but to those who hoped to see their sunshine on the faces of glad relations and expecting friends, it mattered little that the cold wind blew, and that England’s coldest shoulder was turned towards her returning children.

In that ship were Colonel Thornleigh and the beautiful woman who, during the long voyage, had been seen so rarely by any of the other passengers on board the vessel. It was not the Colonel’s regiment that was coming home in the good ship “Theseus ;” nor were there among the few lady passengers any with whom he was personally acquainted ; but still Helen adhered strictly to the privacy of her own cabin, only leaving it at those hours when she and Philip could pace the deck together, and leaning over the high bulwarks, could watch the reflected stars and bright phosphoric lights, safe from observation and remark.

As the voyage drew towards a close, those walks and watchings had grown less frequent ; for Philip had become absorbed in the thoughts of England, with its never-forgotten sports and pleasures, and among the many who looked out anxiously for land (questioning all, from Captain to helmsman, who might be supposed capable of yielding information), few were more eager than Colonel Thornleigh. And yet there was no one in the little misty island that he cared especially to see, for he had few relations, and no heart’s friend half so dear as the one he bore about with him. Still, it was England, and it was home, and therefore the first sight of land afforded him unmixed delight, while, retiring into his cabin, he gave himself up to glad anticipations, and began to write letters vigorously. With Helen the case was widely different. She had been very happy during the voyage, and was by no means desirous to leave the creaking, rolling, tumbling old ship, which contained within its wooden walls wellnigh her all of human affection. Hers was not a desponding nature, or she might have felt gloomy enough as she noted Philip’s rapid fingers running glibly over the page, while he smiled at some thought or anticipation in which she had no share ; and many a woman less gifted with hopefulness would have been chilled and sorely depressed by the little heed he paid to her presence, and the small part he appeared to

have assigned her in the new scenes that were opening before them.

And so the patient woman looked on as he wrote his despatches and forgot her ; while still the winds roared loudly, and still, through the blinding sleet and snow, the ponderous ship rolled onwards to her anchorage. The moorings were reached at last ; and, like some tethered monster straining at the chain that holds it, the battered vessel lay prisoned on the heaving waters. Then boats, manned by dripping watermen, clad in storm-defying vestments, found themselves, as if by a miracle, alongside the ship ; and into one of those adventurous little barques, Philip, leading the chilled and half-numbed Helen by the hand, was almost the first to take passage for the land.

What a landing it was ! And on what a sloppy, slippery, unseemly shore ! Up the dripping stairs, forcing their way among thronging porters, and amphibious bipeds reeking with the fumes of stale tobacco and wet pilot-cloth, the voyagers (with the recollections of the “gorgeous East” fresh upon them) made their way as best they might to such comforts as a Portsmouth inn could give them. And now they were fairly in Old England again. Expectation was over, and certainty had taken its place, as gazing from the wide windows of their hotel in bustling High Street, they reviewed the dripping passers-by, tried to count their umbrellas, and looking in one another’s faces, said they were glad to be at home again !

And next came the important question of where, in the happy home country which they were so proud to call theirs, they should pitch their tent ; or in other words, where they could find a small house, at a rent of about one hundred per annum, in which it would suit them in all respects to take up their abode. Philip was no longer in the army, so their choice was unshackled by military duty ; but how far it might be made reconcileable, alike with the Colonel’s pleasures, and with a due regard to Helen’s comfort, remained to be seen. London was not to be thought of ; for Philip must have his hunting, and have it too in his own county, where it was to be enjoyed at a cheaper rate than elsewhere. There were strong objections to Mrs. Vaughan’s being in the neighbourhood of Philip’s sports, as the county was a highly respectable one, and would be justly indignant if treated with insult ; and an insult it would certainly be considered, were that fair but wicked

face to be forced upon its notice. All these things did Philip revolve in his mind, and revolved them so long, and with Helen's assistance so comfortably to himself, that the plan at last decided upon, was as fully calculated to add to *his* enjoyment, as it was almost certain materially to lessen *hers*.

Within fifteen miles of the family mansion that would one day be Philip's, was a pretty little cottage which was his already. It had formerly belonged to, and been the residence of an aged female relation, who (single both in mind and body) had spent her life in the rigid observance of her moral and religious duties, and who (dying in the odour of sanctity, and the ill-breath of her grand-nephew's misconduct not having tainted her nostrils), left the cottage, where she had passed a life of chastity and decorum, to the nephew of whose antecedents and probable future she knew so little.

It was a pretty domicile, with bees, and brook, and coppice, and many another rural adjunct ; and in it (the fairest of Rosamonds, though there was no labyrinth by which her whereabouts could be concealed from virtuous view) Philip Thornleigh installed his mistress. It is not on record that the shade of the small spinster (whose neat, and somewhat old world-looking person had been wont to occupy those rooms, and tend her flowers in those trim parterres) ever appeared to upbraid her recreant nephew with the desecration of her well-loved cottage ; but certain it is, that the cottage itself was a prison-home to her hapless successor. Cautioned by Philip, and warned by her own dread of insulting looks and words, Helen rarely strayed beyond the precincts of the tiny shrubberies, which by courtesy were called “the grounds ;” and so, waiting for, and always thinking of Philip, she passed the time away.

Meanwhile Thornleigh's amusements had begun in earnest, for both houses, hearts, and weather were alike open to afford him such sport and entertainment as are attainable during an English winter in the country. Thornleigh Abbey was a fine old place, nestled in the snuggest of hollows, and sheltered by the finest of “ancestral trees.” It was approachable from various points by many a carriage-road and pleasant bridle-path ; but when the heir to all this fine estate returned to visit it from what the old folks called the “airmy,” he dismissed his carriage at the lodge, designing to walk along a well-remembered footpath to the house. The season was winter, and the giant oaks were leafless, yet never had he been more impressed

with admiration for the fine old place than on that cold but clear December morning.

Since the day when he had last looked upon it, many a glowing scene of beauty had met his eyes—wondrous trees, bending beneath their clustering fruits, and with gorgeous birds nestling in their foliage—vast plains, and mountains towering to the sky—and hunting-grounds where fierce and noble animals fell victims to his spear—all this and more had been his, to admire and to enjoy ; but now, with feet brushing the withered fern, with no trees around more stately than the branching oak, and only *harmless* living things to note his coming, Philip with a full heart acknowledged, that the home which in his childhood he had loved was not less dear to him in his manhood.

Sir Edgar Thornleigh, Philip's great-uncle, and the present possessor of the Abbey, was what is called “one of the old school ;” by which we may infer that in the days when he was young, schools were neither so numerous or so various as they are in these our times, when we have so many different standards of what is “the right thing.” He had been sixty-two years in Parliament, by which also it may be gathered that during a few of those years he had been both too young and too old to know much about his business. He was very proud of his ancestors, of whom he possessed a plenteous store, both on canvas and in the family vault ; and was equally tenacious of his rights, whether those rights regarded his seat in the loyal county of —, or whether they appertained to that which he occupied in the Chamber of her Majesty's most faithful and devoted Commons. Both those seats, it is almost needless to say, were looked upon by him as the sure inheritance of his nephew, the future Sir Philip.

He was a widower, and in the days of his youth had become the father of a son, whose only child had followed *his* father to the grave some few months before Philip left India. There remained besides, of lineal descendants, only a grand-daughter, the Mrs. Wraxham of whom mention has already been made, and who was now a widow with one son, a boy who was being educated on the Continent, and was about fifteen years of age.

About a week after Helen's establishment at the cottage (her residence in which rural retreat was as yet quite unsuspected by Sir Edgar), the uncle and nephew were seated together before the fire in the spacious dining-room of Thorn-

leigh Abbey. The old man, who was chilly with the winter of his own years as well as with that of a snowy December evening, cowered over the huge logs that lay upon the hearth, the ruddy glow of which shone through his almost transparent hands, and shed a faint rosy tinge over his white hair. He was a handsome old man, small in stature, and beautifully neat in his dress; with a sprinkling of powder on his bald head, and an odour of fresh lavender-water pervading his person.

“Will Parliament meet early, uncle?” asked Philip, who recollect ed that the old man liked being thought a party to the little secrets of Government.

“In March, I believe. We shall have hard work this session; it will be a near thing, and I fear the Whigs will run us hard.” And the octogenarian senator pricked up his ears as though scenting the battle afar off.

“They say that Fuller will be opposed for the other division of the county, and that Brandreth means to stand on the Liberal interest.”

“So I heard—so I heard; but he hasn’t a chance. Thank God, we have no Radicals in this part of the world.”

Philip was not so sure, as was his uncle, that the minds of *all* the freeholders were so closed against Reform, or so choked up by the unhealthy weeds which grow out of the soil of rich men’s prejudices, as to yield without an effort to the imposition of *two* representatives in whose vocabulary Progress stood for Perdition; but he forbore to disturb his uncle’s faith in the stand-still powers of his county, and merely inquired when Sir Edgar intended going to London.

“For the meeting of Parliament, of course,” was the answer; for the honourable member was clearly of opinion that the eyes of the political world were upon him; and was resolved that he at least would fulfil the expectation of confiding England, and —do his duty.

“You will reside in London with me, I conclude,” said the uncle, looking rather doubtfully at his nephew’s handsome face; for he remembered the days when he too was young, before latch-keys were, and what a wearisome place of abode he—in those days—considered the family mansion.

“I am afraid not, my dear uncle. I fancy I shall be very little in town. It would not suit my plans, and Helen—Mrs. Vaughan—is so fond of the country.”

Sir Edgar, who had for some time been employed in picking up with the tongs minute particles of wood, and laying them as carefully on the fire as though the expense of fuel was “an object” to him, now let his shining implement fall with a heavy crash on the hearth, and said slowly, and with an effort at calmness :

“Helen ! and who, may I ask, is Helen ?”

“My dear uncle, have you never heard ?”

“Heard what ?”

“That some one is living with me ;” answered Philip, reluctantly ; for he found it rather difficult to talk of his pleasant vices to an old man of eighty, in whose shrivelled veins not one drop of youth’s hot blood remained, and who sat there looking so immovably moral.

“And who, may I again be allowed to ask, is some one ? Some coloured woman, I suppose ; some unfortunate half-caste, picked up in India, by whom you have half-a-dozen children, as dingy as herself !”

“Not quite so bad as that,” said Philip, smiling at the old man’s rapid jump to the worst conclusion. “Helen is the most lovely—”

“Of course she is.”

“The very best creature—”

“No doubt of it—they are all good creatures.”

“But you must not confound her with others in her position. No wife could love me more devotedly, or behave with a more faultless propriety—”

“A very praiseworthy person, I have no doubt,” interrupted Sir Edgar, damping this burst of enthusiasm ruthlessly. “But I should be glad to know the terms on which you stand with this faultless lady. Nothing binding, I hope ? No promise, eh ?”

“None whatever.”

“No reason why you should not marry to-morrow, if you wished it ?”

“None in the world—only I don’t wish it.”

“Pshaw ! You will wish it ; every one wishes it who has a name and a fame to continue to after-generations. And you are the last of the family, Philip. Don’t let me think there will be none after you, my boy. Don’t let your old uncle die without seeing an heir born to Thornleigh.”

Philip was touched by the pathetic tone in which Sir Edgar

seemed to be so humbly apologising to the dead, who had done their duties as Thornleighs should.

“Time enough,” he said, “time enough, my dear uncle. I never saw you look better—these five years haven’t aged you a day. Why, you might be thinking of marrying again yourself,” he added, with an attempt at jocularity.

Sir Edgar chuckled, and stroked his thin knees coaxingly.

“So you have heard that foolish story, have you?”

His nephew had heard nothing, but humouring the old man’s fancy, he nodded affirmatively.

“Not a word of truth in it, upon my honour. A mere Platonic feeling on both sides. Mrs. Ellerton is a charming woman, but it is her daughter that I have been thinking of; and for you, my dear boy, not for myself. If I were ten years younger, perhaps—”

Philip looked at his uncle’s dried-up atomy of form, and wondered whether at four-score he too would retain within him smouldering ashes which could still be stirred into a lingering life. The thought of such unnatural flames bursting forth from rotten touchwood was unpleasant, and he dismissed it summarily.

“Really,” continued Sir Edgar, “the daughter is charming”—charming was his word for the “very nice,” which so often epitomises the eulogies of the present day—“fine figure, well brought up, good connection, elegant girl, very—but now I think of it,” he added, in a voice of alarm, “I have not asked you where this person is—I hope to Heaven she is not at the cottage, that would be indeed an insult to the whole county, and one which could not be overlooked.”

“My dear uncle, what has the county to do with any private business or pleasure of mine? Helen”—(“Confound Helen,” muttered Sir Edgar,) “Helen went with me to India. She left a comfortable home to follow my fortunes, and has for more than five years behaved incomparably, so I am not going to part from her now, to please a few humbugging squires and their stupid wives, who vegetate in the heart of the slowest county in England!

Did Sir Edgar’s ears deceive him, or was it indeed one of his own household who was a foe to his own county, and faithless to its immortal traditions? It is true that from the rapidity of his wrathful nephew’s utterance, the whole force of his vituperations did not make their way to his understanding; but he

had heard enough to convince him that Philip was indeed not one of “the old school,” and, what was more perplexing still, that the influence of the redoubted “Helen” was not a thing to be easily shaken. At this crisis, however, wearied with so rare an after-dinner exertion, as the discussion of an improper love affair, the old county member, faithful to his custom of an afternoon, whether in the “season” or out of it, rested his well-shaven chin on his neatly-plaited shirt-frill, and slept the sleep of the just.

Meanwhile Philip, in respectful silence, pondered over the words that had been said, and his thoughts savoured of worldly wisdom. The walls of the lofty apartments were panelled with oak, which time had darkened gloomily; and hung aloft were eleven life-length effigies of dead ancestors, who, (all possessed of an air of agreeable majesty, but to none of whom any individual interest was attached,) looking benignly down upon their descendant, took, in their silent, dignified manner, a place in his deliberations.

And now, it must be said, that in spite of Colonel Thornleigh's expressed contempt for the opinions of the county, he was by no means indifferent to that of the world, and had no fancy (metaphorically speaking) for tying up his knocker, and being sick or dead to the many anxious acquaintances—friends, as they are conventionally called, who would crowd to welcome the future possessor of Thornleigh Abbey. He was extremely attached to Helen, who was a very good girl and “all that sort of thing,” and in India, where the practice of strict morality is rather at a discount, and where his own code was that not only of most of his associates, but also of the public at large, his *liaison* with her, even openly avowed, had seemed quite an every-day affair. But *here*, as he now recollects, such things were viewed differently; and with the eyes of England—rural England—upon him, Philip felt the necessity of shrouding his peccadilloes in a decent amount of mystery. The idea was irksome, troublesome, and annoying; and the more so, as it seemed to put Helen before him in a new and not very flattering light.

In an Indian bungalow, surrounded by soldiers, and leading with him the *laissez aller* kind of life which had been so enjoyable, his mistress had seemed in very fair harmony with the scene and its accessories; for if not a “perfect woman,” she had appeared at least very “nobly planned,” and ready for all

the praise, love, kisses, tears, and smiles in the atmosphere of which “perfect women” are supposed to be most at home. Yes—that was the Helen of an Indian home ; but here, with his heart’s voice deadened by the decent draperies of respectability, the hapless victim to his passions stood forth as what in truth she was,—a woman with a brand across her forehead and a scarlet letter on her breast !

Among the useful gifts of instinct bestowed upon the feebler sex (gifts which are often, in their curious way, more subtle and penetrating than the nobler powers of reason), not one of the least remarkable is a woman’s intuitive knowledge when a subject in which her hopes of happiness are involved has deeply occupied the mind of the man on whom that happiness depends. It was an instinct such as this which warned Helen (when, after two days’ absence, Thornleigh returned to the cottage) that evil influences were at work against her.

Philip had been out hunting, and was wet, tired, and rather cross, when (without much of unnecessary ceremony) he flung himself, dirty boots included, upon Helen’s sofa. The act was so contrary to the habits of the man, and also of a gentleman, that many a woman, feeling an English lady’s drawing-room to be her castle, would have remonstrated thereon, or at any rate would have permitted herself to ask the simple, but leading question of what was “the matter ?” This, however, was not Helen’s way ; and knowing that nothing confirms a man’s ill-humour so much as seeming to notice it, she busied herself quietly and unobtrusively in making the peevish man as comfortable as circumstances permitted. And to do him justice, Philip soon grew rather ashamed of himself, and being grateful for the warm slippers, and warmer tea, that Helen prepared to solace his inner man, he rewarded her attentions by becoming more communicative.

“It seems a long while,” said Helen, when the time came for *her* to relate the little uneventful history of her two days’ solitude, “a very long while since you left home ; but I have been too busy to be dull. Is it not pretty ?” she asked, for Philip had as yet expressed no approbation of sundry changes which her tasteful fancy and willing fingers had wrought in their little apartment. They had planned the arrangement of the furniture together, and when he left her, only eight-and-forty hours before, he had seemed as interested as herself in all the details of chintz and muslin, carpets and window curtains ;

but now all seemed changed, and his eyes wandered over the work of her hands, as though he saw it not. Helen had laboured very hard to please him, and her delicate fingers were chafed with the contact of the pins, needles, and stiffened calico with which she had had to deal ; but when all was done, and a few winter flowers had been placed in graceful arrangement upon the table, she looked round approvingly upon the result of her toil, and thought with satisfaction of the kiss that would be her reward.

Foolish woman ! foolish among the thousands who have been so since the world began ! Had the labour of your hands gratified, in any way, the selfish vanity of the man on whom you had wasted so much time and thought, he would have taken you into his arms, and let the light of his countenance shine upon you ; but after all, and with all your pains, you had only contrived to make a small room (fifteen feet square) habitable (and how poor and mean it looked when compared with the gorgeous apartments of Thornleigh !) and, in so doing, you had but performed a humble household duty, and were entitled to no reward.

Helen was disappointed and mortified, so mortified that she could not at first tell her little story calmly.

“A Mr. Brandreth called here yesterday,” she said, as soon as she could trust the steadiness of her voice. “He paid me a long visit, and was very entertaining.”

“Extremely impertinent of him to call, and very bad taste to stay when he found I was not at home.”

“Bad taste ?” said Helen, a little archly. “Now, Philip, you can’t think that ?”

“He wants my vote, I conclude,” said the angry man, overlooking Helen’s small pleasantry altogether, “but he won’t get it ; I don’t know the man, and I don’t want to know him.”

“Wait a little, dear Philip, please, before you make up your mind to dislike my new acquaintance. I think you would approve of many of his opinions, and he seems so thoroughly in earnest ! I cannot tell you how wisely he talked about bettering the condition of the poor.”

“A liberal reformer, eh ? Liberal enough of words and promises, no doubt. Is he a young man ? What sort of a looking fellow ?”

“Oh, nothing very remarkable—a good head, and in figure

tall and slight ; but such a kind face ! and such a pleasant voice ! The only thing against his appearance is a rather ridiculous trick he has of twitching his mouth, which almost made me laugh.”

Helen was not well up in the arts of coquetry, or she would have described her visitor somewhat differently ; and would have remembered (had she planned to retain her sceptre) that women are strong because men are weak, and been aware that could Philip only have surmised (what she knew full well) that for two hours Brandreth’s expressive countenance had shown his fervent admiration of the one that was now looked upon so coldly, Thornleigh would have appreciated her better for that knowledge than for all the gentle care she had bestowed upon his creature comforts.

But Helen loved too sincerely to be on her guard, and so her opportunity was lost, while time sped on, and the dinner and the evening hours passed away, and there was still constraint upon the two who had so lately been lovers, but whom the breath of the world had come between—that breath which was so soon to drive them wide as the poles asunder !

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## CHAPTER VII.

“The child imposes on the man.”—DRYDEN.

“Alas ! for the rarity  
Of Christian charity  
Under the sun.”—HOOD.

PHILIP THORNLEIGH’s repose on the night that followed that cheerless evening was broken by meditations which were anything but pleasant. He was called upon to choose, at least he thought he was, between Helen and the world—between his love and the prejudices of society ; and a host of difficulties and annoyances rose up before him. For Helen he foresaw a perfect hurricane of descending stones ; and he confessed himself powerless to shelter her from the threatened lapidation. If he were only master of the position and the property, if he were only the affluent owner of the means by

which men's mouths are shut, he fancied he might do much ; but for that power he must wait, and in the meantime, putting the best face he could on this “extremely awkward business” (for he had already begun to call the affair by one of its right names) he would wait, with what countenance he could, the *chapter of accidents*. Oh ! that chapter of accidents, from the advent of which men often expect so much ; were we to choose a motto for the heading of it, what more fitting one could be found than the expressive words of *après nous le déluge* ? for truly the mind of a man must be in a reckless and most unseemly state of confusion when, thrusting aside reflection, he decides that sufficient to the day is the evil thereof.

When the morning came, after a night which to Helen also had been one of sorrowing reflection, things began to look a little brighter ; and though joy was not actually a guest at their breakfast-table, the heaviness which had endured through the darkened hours no longer sat brooding at their board. Scarcely however was their morning meal ended, when a tap at the door, unmistakably produced by housemaid's fingers, was answered by a peremptory “come in” from the master.

“ Well, Martha,” said Helen kindly—for she was by nature courteous and felt, perhaps intuitively, the expediency of conciliating those around her ; “ well, Martha, is there anything you want ? you should have waited till I was alone.”

“ Please, ma'am—please, sir,” stammered Martha, looking helplessly from one to the other ; for she had overrated her courage, which oozed rapidly from her moist finger-ends, when she found herself in the awful presence of “the Colonel.”

“ Come, speak out, or leave the room,” said the latter, growing impatient.

“ Please, Colonel, I wish to leave——”

“ Leave and be d——d !” ejaculated the Colonel, with military promptness.

“ Hush, dear,” whispered Helen, somewhat shocked at this outbreak ; “ let me speak to her, and find out why she wants to go.”

“ You had better not ; the girl is impertinent ; tell her to leave the room.” This advice was given in a low tone, for the speaker, having a vague suspicion of what was coming, was desirous, as far as lay in his power, of sparing the feelings of his companion.

But Helen was pertinacious that morning, or possibly

obtuse, and would not, or could not, take the hint that was given her.

“Martha,” she began, “I am sorry for this; you seemed to be going on so well, and your character was everything we could wish.”

“My friends is all respectable,” suggested Martha, whose energies seemed for the moment equal to no greater task than that of taking the measure of her clean white apron, from side to side, and back again.

Helen began to feel alarmed. She had her reasons for holding in horror the ominous word that had just fallen from the lips of the discontented housemaid, and so her tongue was tied; but the silence of her mistress only encouraged the recreant chamber-maiden to let loose the violence of her own untamed member, and havoc was the cry.

“I’ve nothing but my character,” sobbed she, for the apron was now transferred to her deluged eyes. “If I lose my character I’ll never get another place—and mother says which I have now, along of being here. I allers kep myself to myself, and never had no follerers, which wasn’t allowed in places where I lived servant before. Mother says as this is no place for a decent girl to live in, and so I hopes you’ll suit yourselves, and let me go home to-day.”

It was some time before the torrent of words poured forth by the apprehensive Martha could be checked; but when that desirable result was obtained, and silence was at last restored, Helen felt that, like the thunderstorms which are said to “spoil good weather, and make bad worse,” the recent domestic hurricane had been anything but productive of good results.

“Oh, Philip,” she exclaimed, when they were left to their unpromising *tête-à-tête*; “Oh, Philip, I am so very sorry!”

To this humble overture she obtained no response; for, ensconced behind his newspaper, the angry man to whom it was addressed seemed to have forgotten, with an oblivion as total as her own, that *he* was the most to blame, and that she had the best right to commiseration and apology. One more ineffectual effort at conversation, made in the earnest hope of clearing the storm-laden atmosphere, and then (as was her wont in moments of transitory worry and perturbation) Helen threw on her hat and cloak, and leaving Thornleigh to his newspaper and his disgust, betook herself to rapid out-of-door

exercise. She did not shed a tear ; for, besides that she was not constitutionally a weeper, the truth that women often pay dear for the dangerous luxury of tears, was one that had been long known to her. Very unanswerable are they, “ those seas of melted pearl which some call tears,” and so deeming them, the slighted woman dashed *hers* back into their briny bed, and strove to master her emotion.

For the first time she had been humbled before the man who had caused her shame ; the man who now (and this also for the first time) seemed indifferent to her annoyances. And something told Helen that this was but the beginning of sorrows, as the first warning drops that presage the coming tempest. But where, she asked herself—where, when the whirlwind should come, could she hope to find a refuge from the blast ? for there existed for her but one solitary bond, one tie so thin and fine, that a touch snapping it asunder might leave her to drift away alone, a solitary thing, without chart or compass to guide her on her way.

With such poetical rendering of her woes did Helen solace herself, as she paced rapidly along the high-road that led towards the village. She was not yet really miserable, for she could indulge in grief, and revel in the luxury of self-pity ; and therefore, after a while, she began to consider that her self-banishment had endured long enough, and that perhaps—yes, surely, Philip must have missed her—had wanted her possibly ; and with this conviction on her mind, she retraced her steps, and walked rapidly home.

And Philip had missed her—missed her as the lazzarone misses the sun he loves, and the herb the dew that invigorates it. She had been absent but an hour, yet her going thus hastily had frightened him ; and on her return he gladly welcomed to his breast, and to her home, the sweet though fallen angel of the house.

About a fortnight after this domestic episode, the reconciled lovers (though perhaps the name is not strictly applicable) were riding together through the pleasant lanes—pleasant though the season was hardly yet spring, and the weather cold enough—that abounded in the neighbourhood of Thornleigh. They talked together gaily as they rode along, and the fresh wind blew bright roses upon Helen’s cheeks, and added to the lustre of the dark eyes, into which Philip gazed with the tender love that had shone from his own in days gone by.

And thus were they looking, when at the turn of a narrow lane, and at a spot where the ascent was steep and the banks high, they met a carriage, as it slowly descended the hill. It was an open barouche, and contained two ladies and a child. Of the former, one was a little past the prime of life, but still handsome, though of a large coarse beauty ; while the other was striking from her brilliant complexion, her speaking eyes, and the profusion of her red-brown hair. Both ladies turned aside their heads with marked avoidance when they became aware of the propinquity of the equestrians, and the slight—*insult* Philip mentally termed it—was so obtrusively marked, that he resented it keenly, though silently ; for those handsome, disdainful-looking ladies were no strangers to him, and in his early years, before he had “got into that confounded scrape,” (Alas ! poor Helen,) he had known them well, and indeed had been a sort of pet of the elder lady, whose name was Ellerton, and who was the mother of the bright-complexioned girl then seated by her side.

In looking back upon Thornleigh’s boyhood, it would be perhaps too much to aver that Mrs. Ellerton was the cause of his first great dereliction from the paths of moral duty ; but still at thirty he might possibly have been a better man, if at twenty that lady had not generously undertaken, free of cost, except to the boy’s wavering principles, to finish his education for the world he was about to enter. There had been some whispers about their flirtation—whispers softly spoken—for Mr. Mainwaring, Mrs. Ellerton’s then husband, was a millionaire ; and shod with gold, vice finds it easy enough to ride down the prejudices of a pack of scandal-mongers ; moreover, Mrs. Ellerton, to do her justice, gave no great cause for evil tongues to bay at her, being cold and vain, with a dear love for what she called “position,” and so could venture to take fire in her hand (as cold natures can) and remain unscathed.

As for the lad himself, his soft-skinned vanity (for where is the folly or vice in which that element of evil is not found ?) was pleasantly flattered by the idea that the world thought him wickeder than he was ; and (rejoicing more in his supposed iniquity than he possibly might have done had there been truth in the libel) he took his first lesson in the hornbook of human passions.

But the time came when he grew tired of his daily governess ; and though between them there had been naught beyond

the Platonic affection miscalled “pure,” he was as wearied as though they had deserved the imputation which many-tongued rumour had cast upon them. That the boy showed this weariness, and showed it unreservedly, was an offence that Mrs. Ellerton could not pardon, and nourishing her anger in a breast devoid of any warmer and more genial feelings, the evil plant (like an unwholesome fungus) grew and grew, till the bad passion turned to hate. She had one daughter, who was about thirteen, and was absent at school during the time of the “little affair” with Philip ; and many a year had passed since they two had talked of love under the chestnut trees ; and the still fair woman was for a second time a widow, with another little girl to tax her maternal solicitude, when she and Philip met in that narrow lane, while a woman (of what Mrs. Ellerton called the worst description) was a witness of their chance rencontre.

At that period Gertrude Mainwaring had seen some five-and-twenty summers, several of which had of late years been passed abroad with a kind but eccentric female relation, who had generously relieved Mrs. Ellerton from the charge of the tall girl, whose rapid march towards womanhood told tales of her own advancing years.

But enough of Gertrude for the present—enough of the prosperous and successful ; for we must follow Helen’s fortunes, and relate the decline and fall of her Woman’s Empire.

Whether it was that the contempt expressed in the faces of his former friends urged him to the effort of changing their scorn into a more agreeable feeling towards himself, or whether he was warmed into admiration at the sight of newer and therefore more piquant charms, certain it is, that from the date of that inauspicious meeting, Philip Thornleigh found himself often in the society of the ladies of Mainwaring Hall. He was frequently, too, at the Abbey, for there also was one to whom his presence was by no means a matter of indifference. Mrs. Wraxham—the cousin of whom mention has already been made—was a great favourite of Sir Edgar’s ; for she could not only lay claim to the high merit of being a relation, but she was also duly impressed with the honour which that claim conferred upon her. She had had designs upon Philip from her earliest infancy, and had pursued those designs with a tact and perseverance worthy of a better cause.

At a later period, despairing of success, she had—wisely enough as was afterwards proved—married a rich and elderly widower, whose remaining term of life she certainly did not render happy ; but Mr. Wraxham died at the age of seventy, leaving her with one child, and a fortune in railway shares, which might, or might not, turn his widow into what the world calls a “catch.”

Mrs. Wraxham was fond of money, but she was fonder still of rank and title—a predilection which may partly be accounted for by the fact, that in the days of her young-ladyhood, her very particular friend was fortunate enough to make an impression on a peer of the realm ; thus raising her own dignity, while the evil-working passion of envy fermented in the breast of her less fortunate friend.

This sole remaining female scion of the house of Thornleigh was not altogether unattractive in appearance ; and, joined to a certain amount of freshness and prettiness, she had the art, while making men pleased with themselves, of inducing them also to be charmed with her. She was a *cunning* rather than a clever woman ; endowed, however, with the quality of watchfulness, for she was never taken by surprise, and with the gift of prudence, for the order of her retreats was as remarkable as the courage she displayed in her advances.

To marry her cousin Philip—to be addressed as “ My lady,” and to reign as sovereign mistress at Thornleigh, was the unceasing object of Mrs. Wraxham’s ambition ; and to obtain her end there was scarcely any act, however mean and unworthy, to which she would not have descended. She had had early information of Helen’s arrival at the cottage, and having seen her, the alarmed plotter set to work at once to discover some method by which she might lower the dangerous beauty in the estimation of her lover. It was a hard task, that of working her dirty underground mine, with the open fire of the foe playing over her labours ; but in time she succeeded—for who will not succeed who in a bad cause labours long and low enough ? She had had the courage to speak to Philip about the lady of the cottage, and how did she speak of her ? Not violently, or with open virulence, but with a quiet though much-meaning contempt for the class to which she belonged, and with a cruel exaggeration of some little episodes of the poor girl’s childish history—episodes which she had learnt Heaven knows how, but which were not without their effect on Thornleigh.

And yet he dearly loved his mistress still!—loved her for the patience with which she supported his frequent absences, and for the cheerful spirits that for many a week sustained her when, fitful and often impatient, he allowed the impressions he received to tell upon his manner. He little knew how hard the effort was, and how often, fearing that

“Her voice had lost its power,  
Her smile had lost its charm,”

she would sit in what poets call her “bower,” and drawing sad comparisons between the past and present, would look forward with vague anxiety to the future.

It was the end of March now, and the blustering month had been unusually wild and wintry. Philip had been ready with excuses for the many days that often elapsed between his visits to the much-neglected “Rosamond;” but the disappointed and sorrowing woman was not to be deceived by reasons which she more than half suspected were often invented for the occasion. Once, and only once, she reproached him, and that not so much for his neglect as for his want of openness, and the small trust he seemed to place in her who lately had shared his every thought.

“Philip,” she said, “there is a cloud above us; it was small once, and to you may seem so still; but for me, who live almost alone, it grows and gathers fearfully. Will it burst soon, think you? or is there more of cruel waiting yet before me?”

“I do not understand you,” said Philip, though he did.

“Nay, do not say so; there has been such trust between us through these years, and I can better bear that you should cease to love me than that my belief in your true loyalty should be shaken now.”

Her appeal irritated Thornleigh, touching the sore place in a conscience which was still tender.

“Helen,” he said, rising and standing near her, with his elbow resting on the mantelshelf, “let us understand each other. Have I ever deceived you?”

“Till lately, never.”

“Pshaw! you must not call deception the little civil excuses that enforced absence makes sometimes necessary. I mean, have I ever been untrue to you, or ever led you to form expectations impossible to be realized?”

It was said, and compunction followed on the fault as rapidly

as the thunder booms after the cannon’s flash. He had never seen Helen angry before—never seen the half-closed, sleepy eye light up with indignant fire, or the delicate nostril dilate with scorn ; but looking in her face now, compunction (as we have said) followed quickly on the error he had committed.

There was no violent outburst, and not one of the reproachful words that Philip in his penitence so dreaded to listen to ; but after a few moments, given to quelling the angry tumult in her heart, she said, coldly and simply :

“ I thank you, for you have made the task that might have been so hard an easy one, and extracted the sting from the bitterness of regret.”

“ What task ? what regret ? ” faltered Philip, fearing he knew not what. “ Helen, forgive me ; I had no right to say those words—they were cruel, rude, and most undeserved.”

“ Undeserved, indeed,” said the already softened woman, looking down upon the hands which were clasped upon her knee ; “ for much as you have given me, I have given *you* more, and you owe me something still.”

She looked so beautiful while thus proudly pardoning him, that Thornleigh, yielding to a momentary inspiration of his better self, spoke the words which many a woman in a position such as hers would have listened to with rapture.

“ Helen,” he said, “ there is but one way left to prove my love, and but one reparation for the past, that I can offer you. Nellie, you must be my wife.”

“ Must ! ” repeated she in a half-whisper and with a *whole* smile upon her lip. “ Must ! Philip, this is not the first time that I have been told you *ought* to marry me—not the first time that I have been informed how necessary is the reparation you have offered to the woman who gave up all for you. I thank you for your proposal, but forgive me when I add that the idea is as distasteful to me now as it was in the days I tell you of.”

It was now Philip’s turn to be angry, though pride forbade any open evidence of his displeasure ; and so, for yet another and a far longer period, the hearts in which so much love lay hidden were kept asunder, and Helen was left alone, mourning for her desolation, and repenting her of the bitter words in which her refusal of her lover’s offer had been couched.

On an evening in early spring, that chilly time when days

grow long and winds blow keenly, Helen, alone and spiritless, sat in her little drawing-room. There were no flowers in it now, only the withered leaves of dying hope, and a sad heart waiting still !

Suddenly, for her eyes had not been turned towards the approach, a ring at the bell announced a visitor. Helen's heart beat quickly ; and while listening to the rain that pattered against the window, and the wind that whistled through the leafless trees, it was with difficulty that she could contend against a creeping prognostication of evil to come. The interval of time that intervened before the door was opened seemed interminable ; and at length a second and a louder peal announced that the patience of the visitor was being too largely drawn upon. The truth was that Philip's domestics (never over-attentive to their duties) were at that moment engaged in their respective pleasures ; the general in-door servant, “out of livery,” having betaken himself to the village for news and beer ; and the housemaid being what is expressively termed “out of the way.” At last Helen's own maid (a somewhat flighty and independent young woman) having condescended to “go to the door,” the visitor was admitted to the lady's presence.

The latter turned very pale on the announcement of the name ; but when the gentleman approached, and in a grave manner offered his hand, the blood rushed tumultuously to her cheek. She knew him well, both by name and reputation ; for he was the incumbent of the living of which Sir Edgar Thornleigh was the patron ; and she believed him to be a good man, or Philip, whose prejudices were not usually in favour of the cloth, would not so often have spoken of him in terms of unqualified commendation.

But highly bred and kindly natured as his bearing bespoke him to be, Mr. Herbert was embarrassed now ; for he had come on a cruel errand, and was at once aware that instinct, that sixth sense afforded for the protection of the weak, had already apprised the anxious woman of a coming calamity.

Seeing this, and being aware of no possible advantage that could accrue from delay, he entered at once on the subject of his mission.

“Mrs. Vaughan,” he began, in a low and hesitating tone, “I have taken the liberty of calling on you, for the purpose of performing a painful duty.”

Helen took the alarm at once. Something, she feared, must

have happened to Philip, or why did his friend look so grave and sympathising?

“Mr. Herbert!” she cried, with a sort of gasp, “he is safe? Oh! do not say that any accident has happened to Colonel Thornleigh!”

“No fresh accident,” replied he, with a little peculiar meaning in his intonation. “Colonel Thornleigh is well in health, but he is suffering much mental anxiety. My dear madam, you must allow me to proceed” (for Helen seemed preparing to interrupt him). “My friend Thornleigh is placed in circumstances of great difficulty and perplexity, and being anxious to spare you the pain of hearing of those circumstances from common rumour, he has requested me to call upon you. I wish that I could find words wherewith to break this matter gently to you, but—well—perhaps it would be better to tell you at once, that Colonel Thornleigh is going to be married.”

There are some situations in life, in which pride—even such pride as that poor woman had a right to feel—is a supporter of giant strength. It came to her aid at that miserable moment, and sent back the tears upon her aching heart.

“I think it would have been better, more considerate, perhaps, had Philip himself informed me of his resolution;” and she spoke with a calmness that would have been called dignity in a more virtuous woman.

“You will forgive him, I am sure you will, for he shrank from the sight of your tears.”

“He need not have been driven to so poor a reason. Tell him, Mr. Herbert, that I shed none. Tell him that I am content, and am ready to depart.”

The clergyman was taken by surprise. He had come prepared for a painful scene,—for reproaches and, perhaps, hysterics, and he found, instead, a lovely, dignified woman, accepting her fate nobly, and enduring her punishment without a murmur.

“I will be the bearer of any message with which you care to entrust me,” he continued, after a pause; “but I have not yet executed all my commission. Philip wished me to say that he is so sorry—so distressed, and bade me tell you that nothing but necessity——”

“Necessity!” repeated Helen bitterly.

“Yes, *necessity*; for he has but yielded to his uncle’s wish—the uncle who has been a father to him. He repents deeply

now of the great wrong he has done you, and wishes earnestly to repair that wrong, as far as the doing so lies in his power.”

“He can make no reparation to me, for I have refused his hand. But tell him this from the woman he has forsaken—tell him that I shall forgive him sooner than he will forgive himself, but that I will never see him again—never again—never !” she repeated in pitiful accents most mournful to listen to.

Seeing she was rapidly talking herself to tears, Mr. Herbert hastened his endeavour to check the coming crisis.

“You must not send me away,” he said, “without some word of comfort for Philip. Do you suppose that you are the only sufferer ? Ah ! could you but have seen him, as he looked this morning, his heart filled—for, believe me, it was—with compassion and tenderness for the dear friend of many years, you would have pitied him.”

“Was he so unhappy ? My poor Philip !”

“Indeed he was : and if you knew how anxious he is to ensure your welfare and independence, you would accept the means——”

But this was too much ; for interrupting him hastily, she erected her beautiful head, and looked almost defiantly at the young Rector.

“And does he suppose,” she said, “that I will take his money for my shame, and receive payment for the love I have wasted on him ? Tell him that I gave him my heart’s passion freely, but that it was a thing beyond price, at least beyond such price as he can give. I have been dependent upon his bounty,” she added in a tone of bitter scorn ; “*that* was my payment while I loved him ; but the account between us is settled now ; tell your friend that he has my receipt in full.”

“God help you, poor soul !” was Herbert’s reply to this outbreak of wounded feeling. “Nay, do not send me away” (for she was waving him impatiently from the room), “I cannot leave you in this reckless mood.”

“Oh ! go, go,” cried she, stamping her small foot impatiently. “You see nothing. Cannot you feel that I long to be alone—alone with my broken heart ?” and flinging herself on the couch, she buried her head in the cushions, and sobbed with hysterical violence.

Herbert was a young man, and stern moralist ; but, exem-

plary divine as he was, he could not look with unpitying eyes on that woman's great grief.

“Oh,” thought he, “that those abundant drops were the sighs of repentance as well as of regret! Then, like the sinful Mary's tears, they would indeed be an offering worthy Heaven. But alas! I fear that for a nature so passionate and impulsive, there is much of trial and tribulation yet in store, ere, like the Magdalene of old, she will weep and be forgiven!”

And Helen continued to moan pitifully, while her hand,—and it was a very beautiful one,—hung listlessly by her side. There was something so touching in her attitude, as she lay there crushed, and abandoned to her sorrow, that Herbert, who remembered his own young sisters and some of their childish griefs, took that small white hand in his, and pressed it as soothingly as if they two had been the children of one mother. Helen looked up, with a wintry smile upon her tear-stained face.

“You are very good,” she said humbly, “and I have been too impatient. You will say to Colonel Thornleigh that I am ready to follow his wishes in everything. You will say how I wish and pray that he may be happy.” She was shedding softer tears now, for truly the chain that bound her to him was made of no common links. She had asked no questions concerning his destined bride, nor was there need for her to ask them; for well she knew, by her woman's heart of divination, that Thornleigh's future wife was no other than Gertrude Mainwaring, the fair daughter of that insolent and worldly mother.

“And I may come and see you again, may I not?” asked the Rector, who still held her hand in his; for indeed she seemed too sad and desolate to be left alone.

“Yes, but do not leave me yet; it is so dreadful to have no companions but my own thoughts. I dread to be alone—alone in this dismal room,” and she looked round her with a shudder.

“You will not be alone. There is no such thing as solitude. We have each and all of us a companion in our conscience—each and all of us a guardian in our God.”

“Yes, but *my conscience* is my enemy; and I cannot—dare not pray. I am not bold enough to mock at the Almighty.”

“Hush! there is no mockery in prayer, no mockery in the resolution to go and sin no more.”

“But I do not give up my sin, the very memory of which is dear to me. Is there merit in abstaining from offence when temptation exists no longer? And when I declare to you that if Philip were to return to me to-morrow I should forgive him, and——Well, do you call this repentance?”

Somewhat shocked at the cynical tone of her confession, the Rector almost dropped the hand he held; an action which was at once noticed by the sensitive woman, who was thus silently rebuked.

“How wicked you must think me!” she exclaimed; “but I cannot help it, for—God help me—my heart feels cold and hard as marble.”

“If that prayer comes from the heart, it will be heard above,” said Herbert, as he rose to depart. “But you are wearied now, and I will bid you farewell; to-morrow I will call again, and may God comfort you and give you better thoughts!”

He left her: and as the door closed upon his retreating footsteps, Helen felt that the curtain had fallen upon the first act of her life’s drama.

Many causes combined had induced Colonel Thornleigh to decide on the expediency of yielding to his uncle’s wishes, and taking to himself a wife. Of these causes, constant companionship with a very attractive girl was doubtless not among the least important; but there was another passion at work, which, like the little leaven, “leavened the whole lump,” and that passion was *jealousy*. When he found himself alone, after the only bitter words that ever passed between him and Helen had been uttered, he was induced (foolishly enough) to cast up the small sum (that seems so simple, but is often found so intricate), and which is familiarly called *putting two and two together*. Then all things seemed to contribute towards swelling his jealous suspicions concerning Helen’s *past*. Mrs. Wraxham’s coarse insinuations, her own allusions to the advice given her concerning himself, and then the man’s own letter, for it was, indeed, of the humble, unoffending assistant-surgeon that Philip—though he would have resented the accusation as an insult—was jealous in his heart of hearts. Yes, Colonel Thornleigh—fine gentleman, and fearless and without reproach as he deemed himself—had condescended to listen to the voice of slander—to listen and to believe! And so the sacrifice was offered; and he must learn to be happy after another fashion.

But what need is there to follow Helen through this dreary passage of her existence? What need to draw a picture of her grief, for the comment of the many who have endured tribulations, and for the few who have escaped them?

Helen is not an imaginary character, she has existed, and does still exist; and so, remembering that

“Virtuous and vicious, every one must be;  
Few in the extreme, but all in the degree!”

we will not describe her as perfect in her patience. Still, she was brave and prudent, not dwelling ceaselessly on her great wrong, but with something of anger towards him whom she endeavoured to forget, struggling through the painful interval between the infliction of the wound and the healing thereof.

Her resolution to accept no pecuniary assistance from Philip was never changed; nor would she consent to hold any communication with him, either in person or by letter. This grieved Philip more than he cared to own; and could Gertrude Mainwaring have guessed how often his thoughts wandered towards his lost love, she might perhaps have feared to entrust her happiness to his keeping, and have refused to accept the sacrifice that was offered her.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

“And look before you ere you leap,  
For as you sow, you’re like to reap!”

HUDIBRAS.

“She that soweth the storm shall reap the whirlwind.”

PROVERBS.

WE have given but a hurried sketch of Helen Langton’s early history, and must now leave her for a time, in order that we may recount, in as few words as possible, the events that followed on Thornleigh’s marriage. The capital of love, on which Gertrude and her husband began their matrimonial career, might have lasted them their lives, had circumstances not been adverse; and had not the unthinking pair (like many another newly-wedded couple) mistaken their principal for their income, and so spent it lavishly.

The portion brought by Gertrude to the general stock was by far the larger of the two ; and when she discovered that domestic secret, she not only *felt* aggrieved, but was imprudent enough to make a display of her disappointment. But after all, what cause had she for complaint ? She had obtained the object of her ambition,—her escape from an unhappy home had been effected, and the *cri de la nature*—“*épousez-moi !*” had been duly and properly responded to.

Philip’s love had been at the first as wild and absorbing as the passion he had once felt for Helen Langton ; a cleverer and a less demonstrative woman might, in the early days of their married life, have turned that passion to good account ; but Gertrude, though possessed of a nature as passionate, and nearly as impulsive as her rival’s, was wholly deficient in that variety of charm which is the best safeguard against satiety. With her there was nothing to discover, nothing to hope for, and nothing to fear, for all seemed known and given at once, with lavish hand, openly and without reserve ; and then when the burst of passion was spent, there remained the days, and months, and years, in which Gertrude believed that her husband took no delight either in her or her society. But she was wrong in this, and perhaps the conviction that she was in error, had many a time rested on the merest chance—a word, a look even, might have brought together those estranged hearts ; but, as we have before said, the tide of circumstances set against them, and so side by side, like parallel lines, they remained separated and apart.

They had two children ; a boy named Edgar, and a pretty fairy girl, the “little Marie,” whose spirit ministered to her father’s when *his* was hovering on the confines of eternity. Philip dearly loved those children, and so loving them, could not but feel drawn to her who had bestowed on him those valued blessings ; but Lady Thornleigh (for Sir Edgar’s white head was laid on the lap of earth, where, let us hope, he slept as soundly as in his elbow chair at the old Abbey), Lady Thornleigh herself repelled by her conduct the advances of returning tenderness.

The youngest child was about two years old, when the aged baronet, having lived to see a new generation spring up at Thornleigh, bade it farewell for ever. There was peace and seeming confidence then within its walls ; but in another year all was altered ; for the demons of doubt and discord spread

their dark wings over the household and hung and fluttered there.

At that period various circumstances arose, which awoke the spirit of watchfulness in Philip's breast. It was not only that his wife's visits to her children in their nursery had become more rare, and that she had ceased to take her former delights in the simple pleasures that are sufficient for a heart at ease. It was not only that at the hour when letters were expected, her cheeks would flush and her hands tremble ; nor was it that she flew to excitement to escape the gnawing anxiety which in the quiet of her home seemed for ever wearing away her spirits. It was not one, but all these evil symptoms combined, which raised doubts and alarms in Philip's mind, filling it with a vague uneasiness and a sense of painful insecurity. He had no confidant, for to no living being would he allow himself to confess his fears ; but there was one who guessed them ; and, singular as it may appear, that one was a young and guileless girl.

Alice Ellerton, Lady Thornleigh's half-sister, was essentially “country bred ;” she had never possessed that thing of doubtful good, a young female friend, nor had she ever wished for a companion of her own age, to share in either her pleasures or her pains. Hers was a fine, intelligent, unwarped, upright character ; too intelligent not to guess at the nature of the husband's fears, and too straightforward to pretend, even to herself, that the *proper* simplicity of girlish seventeen should have revolted from such precocious surnises. Young as she was, Alice was already an affianced wife ; already a holder of a ticket in the great matrimonial lottery ; and it was by the Rector of Thornleigh, Philip's early friend, that her affections had been gained ; gained, however, only by the strong power which habit and continued association sometimes exercise over the affections of the young.

From the day of Gertrude's marriage Alice had become an inmate of her sister's home, and almost from that hour had commenced the influence of Herbert's mind over hers. As a little girl of thirteen he was her hero, her *beau idéal* of all that was good, noble, and protecting, and whether he read the prayers of the Church, in the half-intoning fashion permitted by his moderate High Churchism ; or whether, rising above the rest in song, his voice sounded to the vaulted roof of the fine old chapel at Thornleigh, the girl's heart rose with it,

and love and the religious enthusiasm of the moment mingled together in its aspirations. The child had scarcely ceased to be a child, when she knew that Herbert loved her ; how and when she gained that knowledge she knew not, but the certainty was pleasant, and it seemed as natural to return that love as to lavish her deep affections on the little children who clung to “Aunt Alice” with a devotion greater than that inspired by either father or mother.

One great charm in Alice’s nature lay in its rare unselfishness. Herbert said and thought that in its simplicity lay its chief merit ; but in that he was probably mistaken, for it is only the *name* which pleases even a poet ; the reality of “sweet neglect,” either of mind or person, being usually anything but becoming. It is not every face that can make mere simplicity a grace ; and even Alice’s sweet countenance might have been insipid in Herbert’s eyes, had it possessed only the one feminine charm which he professed to see there.

By no one was the value of his sister-in-law’s rare character better appreciated than by Philip Thornleigh ; and it was sometimes irritating to him to listen to the encomiums lavished by his friend on the “sweet simplicity” of his ladye love. Philip was of a dissentient, though scarcely of an argumentative turn of mind ; and would frequently differ, decidedly but curtly, with the Rector on the merits of his chosen bride.

“My dear fellow,” he would say, “it’s all very well to talk of simplicity, but it’s a bore, and so you would think, were Alice in reality the simple being you imagine.”

“But at seventeen,” remonstrated Herbert—

“Well, at seventeen Alice is just what she ought to be,—a dear, good, wide-awake girl—and believe me that, if at her age she were not *that*, she would be a fool.”

“I hate wide-awake girls.”

“No, you don’t ; you think you do, or rather you say you do, just as men say they like light claret, or water zouchy, or any other wishy-washy thing ; but it’s all humbug and bosh !”

Meanwhile Alice’s unobtrusive, unvaunting self-sacrifices were endearing her to all who approached her : but she did not perform her daily duties to be praised of men, for she was destitute of *le courage de ses vertus*. Vanity is as much seen, and is as easy to be traced in an apparent absence of selfishness, as in almost any other act of our scheming existence ; and where one human being denies himself a pleasure, or in-

flicts on himself a pain for abstract love of his neighbour, ten thousand will do the same that men may speak well of them.

It was thought by many (and in that opinion Sir Philip, highly as he valued his friend Herbert, coincided) that Alice Ellerton might have “done better” than cast her lot with a well-born clergyman, endowed with an income of five hundred pounds a-year. There was some reason in the remark, and there would have been more, if the fine feathers that make fine birds necessarily make them happy ones also ; or if there had been anything in the future husband’s disfavour to warrant those apprehensions on the part of the kind friends, whose pity was in proportion to the envy that would have been excited, had Alice’s intended bridegroom been in the possession of exalted rank and an unlimited command of money. Several good gifts had fallen to the lot of Francis Herbert. In person he was one that many a woman might have loved for that advantage alone. He was accomplished, too,—his musical talents being far above the average ; and his voice in song one that few could hear unmoved. His chief peculiarity lay in the extraordinary amount of control which he had obtained, and continually exercised over himself : in which respect he was as consistent as any character read of in novel or romance ; and (by the way) unnatural enough are often those imaginary characters ; extreme in good or ill ; always speaking, thinking, or acting up to the standard, or down to the level which an inventive genius has created, the heroes and heroines we read of, being rarely inconsistent, are not true to nature, and therefore generally fail in exciting our sympathy and interest.

It was curious how little Alice knew of her future husband’s mind or disposition. She had no idea of him as a somewhat rigid disciplinarian, nor guessed that he had set up a standard, for himself and others, so high, that even to keep the mental eye fixed momentarily upon it, was an effort for weak human nature to perform.

It was not for a young, pure girl, to surmise that her lover’s nature was wanting in warmth and softness ; and that what ashes remained from the fire of his hot youth, were well-nigh trodden out under the crushing heel of stern asceticism. But it was for *him* to have thought well and deeply ere he condemned another (and that other possibly a contrast to himself) to the existence he deemed a fitting preparation for disem-

bodied spirits throughout eternity ; and this duty he had failed to perform. He loved Alice dearly,—as dearly, at least, as it was in his nature to love ; but with his affection there was mixed a strong leaven of prudence, and a decided determination that while he was strengthening himself to the performance of his duty as a Christian clergyman, his promised bride should put herself through a course of training befitting the place she was to occupy as his helpmate. It was not by outward adorning and plaiting of hair that the wife of the model rector was to be remarkable ; and Herbert had already made mental sketches of a style of dress and deportment, which it might require a considerable exertion of Alice's power of self-sacrifice to conform to.

There was but one frequent guest—always excepting the Rector—at Thornleigh Abbey ; and that guest was no other than Arthur Brandreth, the Liberal member for the county. Helen had well described the man, when five years before he had paid his canvassing visit to her cottage—but he had improved since those days. His tall figure had, with advancing years, filled out into the perfection of muscular proportion ; and though his face could not be called handsome, his countenance was remarkable for its intelligence, and his smile was peculiarly attractive.

Philip, hedged round from his youth with the microscopic divinity which places landed proprietors in the centre of a ring-fence of self-created importance, differed from Brandreth in politics, and at first decided to have no acquaintance with the “new man,” who had settled in the county without his consent, and become its representative contrary to his wishes. For a time he had kept to his resolution, but Brandreth's universal popularity bore down all before it ; and Sir Philip perceiving that his *hauteur* and his snubbings were (if noticed at all) entirely unheeded by their intended victim, at last laid down his useless weapons, and Brandreth, *en bon prince*, acknowledging the real worth of his former opponent, generously admitted him to his friendship, and both were gainers by the alliance.

Behold Philip and his two guests seated, one summer evening, under the wide verandah that extended along a portion of the south front of the Abbey. This pleasant shelter was filled with flowering plants and shrubs, the blossoms of which threw up, to the coming night, a perfect gush of fragrance ; a frag-

rance wasted upon two of the party, who, reclining on cushioned seats, smoked their cigars lazily.

The Rector did not smoke ; no man at Magdalen had more enjoyed his pipe during the days and nights to which, because he had had such pleasure in them, he now forbade himself to look back ; but in common with other pleasant little sins which a man abjures (or should abjure) when, going forth from the wing of *Alma Mater*, he devotes himself to the service of the Church, the man of sacrifices threw his clay afar from him, and only inhaled the scent of the beloved weed afar off ! This act of self-devotion was doubly felt to be such when the friendly fumes were pleasantly tickling the nostrils of other men ; and on this occasion he looked so longingly on the pleasures of his friends, that Brandreth, maintaining that it is only “when ignorance is bliss that it is folly to be wise,” urged him to break through his resolution for once, and try the very best cigars that ever man indulged in.

“I should like to be convinced, now, why a parson shouldn’t smoke,” he remarked, after expressing his surprise at the Rector’s persistent refusal of his offer. “I really *should* like to know why it is more wicked to inhale one scent than another. You have been intoxicating yourself for the last ten minutes with the perfume of an exceptional moss-rose” (Herbert looked conscious, for the flowers had been transferred from Alice’s hand to his), “and you consider *us* as sinning in some way or other, God knows how, because our ideas of what constitutes sensual indulgence differ from your own.”

“It is not that ; you quite mistake my meaning. What may be a venial error in a layman, becomes a grave sin when committed by one of my profession. There is so much in example.”

“Ah ! now you are going from the point and butting at me with the blunt end of a truism. Not” (he added, as he puffed out a volume of smoke with some degree of impatience)—“not that I deny the justice of the one you have just uttered ; but I like a man to reason from his own belief, and I hate everything that saves thought. As a general rule, ‘received maxims’ have, I am convinced, often much to answer for—as much perhaps as half the lies that are uttered. One knows a lie’s a lie.”

“Does one ?” put in Philip, drily.

“Yes, one does ; at least, I flatter myself that *I* do : but these stereotyped sayings being generally supposed to contain a

portion of the concentrated essence of our grandfathers' wisdom, posterity takes them upon trust, and, without questioning either their prudence or their common sense, acts upon them. But you have not yet explained to me your meaning when you asserted that an act which is nothing more than a bad habit in a layman, becomes a heinous sin when committed by a clergyman.”

Herbert hesitated; Brandreth was a close reasoner, and, knowing it, he rather shrank from crossing bayonets with so stubborn an antagonist.

“I meant, my dear fellow—of course you know what I meant.”

“I don't—I want to know; but perhaps you had better postpone my enlightenment till your next Sunday's sermon. Thornleigh,” he continued, addressing his host, “this discussion must bore you, I am afraid; but one thing I will affirm, namely, that men often cavil at goodness when it appears in a form which it irks them to imitate; and they are more inclined to envy the high reputation earned by a blameless life, than to endeavour to act up to the standard set before them.”

“What a depressing opinion you have formed of our common nature!” said Herbert. “But to leave general remarks and descend, if you will *con-descend* to my particular case, I must just ask you this one question. How could I, were I to be seen with a cigar in my mouth, preach to my parishioners against a habit which, once formed, is almost the most difficult in the world to break through; a habit that leads them to the beer-shop, induces the love of drink, and often wastes more than the shilling a week so ill-spared by a family whose united weekly earnings may not perhaps amount to more than a dozen of those humble coins?”

“Well—but here—with us, and away from your poor parishioners, who I am not sure would not feel themselves drawn to you by seeing their weakness shared, surely there can be no harm in the indulgence. *We* cannot be called weak brothers, and can hardly offend in this matter more deeply than at present; if, indeed, it can be an offence to enjoy one of God's good gifts as thoroughly and gratefully as I am enjoying this most delicious of all Havannahs.”

“But were I to give in now and yield to the temptation,” said Herbert, smiling good-humouredly, “who can answer for my not falling away altogether? Who can say that he will

stop at the first pipe any more than at the first step which leads to any other vice ? ”

“ Ah, well ! if you are so afraid of yourself, I have nothing more to say, but I do think it a cruel thing to deny a poor devil the indulgence of a habit which has been fostered in him from his infancy by our own shortcomings, and which it would require something a good deal more powerful than either words or example to induce him to break through. The poor man works hard enough, God knows ; why then deny him the only luxury which his limited means enable him to procure ? ”

“ And so you would advocate a vicious indulgence as a means of making up to him for his other privations ? You would encourage him to take poison, because the wholesome food of trial, and (may be sometimes) of a little useful privation, is not altogether to his taste ! ”

“ Just so ; the poor man must take such scanty comfort as is permitted him, be such comfort ever so pernicious. The fault, if fault there be, can hardly be laid to the charge of the man who by his almost fireless grate, and surrounded by his ill-fed children, uses, and perhaps abuses, the few gifts we leave him. The hungry, hopeless labourer will drink and smoke, and the worn wife will learn to follow his example ; for the downward path is indeed an open way to all ; and if there be danger for you, how much the more for those who entertain no exalted sense of their own responsibilities, and in whose temperament the *animal* necessarily triumphs over the intellectual.”

“ There you are wrong again,” said Herbert, “ for the lives led by the lower orders, and the limited education they receive, tend greatly to diminish their craving after excitement. Their nerves are of a tougher fibre, and in their constitution there is far less of the sympathetic than is to be found amongst persons in our rank of life. Were I to indulge in the enjoyment which appears at this moment so agreeable to you, it would be at the risk of recalling scenes which I now consider vicious, and amusements which I feel it is safer to forget. But while to me the perfume of the weed acting on the memory might be pernicious ; to the poor man a white clay pipe——”

“ *A clay pipe is, and nothing more,*” laughed Brandreth. “ It seems to me, however, that you are deserting your own line of country and taking to mine. If the labouring man be the mere clod you describe, the less danger is there of his taking

the second step which alarms you so sorely ; and the more willingly should you allow him the comparatively safe pleasure of his pipe of ‘shag.’ The poor man,—”

“For Heaven’s sake, let the poor man alone,” cried Philip, “at least *my* poor men. I give them half-a-crown a day ; their rent is low, and if they are ill or in trouble by no fault of theirs” (“a curious exception that,” muttered Brandreth), “I am always ready to help them. Besides there are all the things that Alice and Lady Thornleigh give them.”

“Ah, that *giving*,” said Brandreth sadly, “of all forms of charity, *giving* is the worst. What has lowered the character of what we may now almost with justice call the ‘lower classes,’ but the being *given* to ? We complain of the low tone of feeling prevalent among the poor. We complain of their ingratitude and their degradation, and lament, that in strong contrast to their forefathers, they no longer look upon the receiving of parochial relief in the light of a disgrace. But what is one of the principal causes of this marked deterioration ? What but the absence of all self-respect, caused by their being necessarily in the receipt of alms ! The feeling of honest independence once tampered with, the hand once held out for charity, and the *caste* is lost ; then the unfortunate recipients, deprived of all hope of being cleansed from the stain—like the once-flogged soldier—sink hopelessly into the abyss of degradation.”

“But what would you do ?” asked Herbert. “We are told that the poor shall not cease out of the earth, and are enjoined to give in charity to those that are in need.”

“To this I shall reply by one of your own truisms—one, however, that deserves to be written in letters of gold, viz., that ‘Prevention is better than cure.’ True, the irrecoverable words have gone forth, which condemn a certain proportion of our fellow-creatures to comparative *poverty* ; but I have yet to learn that any are pre-doomed to positive destitution ; any whose meed it is to die of *want*. Hard, indeed, it is, and God has said it, for the rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. But why hard ? I say, *because of the poor*—of the poor whose well-being they neglect ; of the poor who will hereafter rise up in judgment against them, and condemn them !”

Here Thornleigh broke in impatiently.

“And what, may I ask, do you think of our public charities ; of our munificent donations to the starving populations both of our own and other lands ? Read the columns of the *Times*, and

count up the names of rich men who give their hundreds, and of less opulent ones who offer up their mite.”

“Granted that it looks well, and in many of those who so give, it *is* well; but I confess to being suspicious of the charity that vaunteth itself in the broad columns of a newspaper: as well engrave it on the phylacteries, and enlarge for its insertion the border of our garments. There is no denying the fact that we have among nations a great name for charity, and that our good deeds are trumpeted forth on sounding brass, and titillate our ears with a pleasant sound of tinkling cymbals; but, in my opinion, the man who does good by stealth and would blush to find it fame, does better service to the indigent, and is perhaps nearer the kingdom of heaven.”

“Really,” said Philip a little peevishly, for he did not quite approve of post-prandial discussions when they took a serious turn; “really, to hear *you* quoting Scripture, my dear Brandreth——”

“Reminds you of the devil doing the same thing,” interrupted his friend cheerfully. “But never mind. Bible sentences are always effective, and nothing tells more than a text, even supposing one had no better motive for introducing them,” added he half apologetically; for he saw that the Rector was making ready for a protest, and the present neither seemed a fitting time, nor the audience a sufficiently liberal one for the advantageous setting-forth of his peculiar tenets.

“Have it out with Alice,” was their host’s suggestion, as they rose from their seats. “Alice will floor you at once; she’s a dead hand at that sort of thing.”

“And I am sure,” added Herbert, following up his friend’s move, “that Miss Ellerton’s visits to the cottages——”

“My dear fellow, were they an angel’s visits,” broke in Brandreth.

“My sister-in-law’s to wit,” suggested Philip, provokingly.

“Precisely so,” was Brandreth’s unabashed reply. “And I am sure Herbert will agree that the words are synonymous; but even so, I deprecate visits, the result of which is to lower the sense of moral responsibility, and induce a reliance on what is vague, that is highly prejudicial to the healthy continuance of individual exertion. But as Thornleigh advises, I will have it out with Miss Ellerton. I am tolerably sure of making a convert of her, and am willing to enter the lists at once.”

During the early part of this conversation the figures of the

sisters had been dimly visible among the shrubs, and on the distant portion of the lawn their white garments were traceable as they flitted here and there along the well-kept walks. But now night was come—the sweet, calm, summer-night—and their forms were no longer discernible in the gathering darkness.

Though the state of chronic suspicion into which Philip's mind had been tormented by his wife's altered conduct had considerably diminished his affections for her, yet enough of that affection still remained to make him long to prove her deserving of the residue that was left. The “doating, yet doubting,” “the suspecting, yet strongly loving” symptoms of the complaint had been gone through, and were past away to return no more; and his condition had now become one that nothing short of decided measures could improve, or the shock of some happy discovery startle into a more satisfactory state of being.

Philip Thornleigh was one of those men to whom the approximation of women is almost as necessary as the air they breathe. Had any one ventured to accuse him of such a weakness, he would have resented the imputation with honest indignation; but the accusation was, nevertheless, well deserved; a fact that might have been proved to himself every hour of the day. It was not so much their conversation, as the sight of the gentle sex, and, albeit unknown to himself, their softening influence on the home atmosphere, that were so essential to his enjoyment of existence; and yet he was more given to miss them, almost painfully, when absent, than to appreciate them when present with discrimination and good judgment. He valued them *collectively*—if we may so speak—more than individually; as an instance of which, it is probable that he never separated, or even attempted to separate, the very different merits or claims on his notice of his wife and his wife's sister; regarding them both as pieces of useful and ornamental furniture, alike necessary to his comfort and pleasant to his eyes.

Seeing that this was the light in which Sir Philip was wont to view the women of his household, it is not surprising that when he and his guests emerged from their darkened retreat, and sauntered into the drawing-room, a feeling both of surprise and disappointment should have crept over him, when he found their accustomed places empty. The dazzling lamp-light found

its way into every corner of the lofty chamber, but its rays betrayed no Gertrude reposing in dreamy idleness on the sofa, and no Alice quietly occupied (as was her custom), with her music or her book. The room seemed very empty to those three men ; but it was by Brandreth that the void was felt the most ; the others missed their *belongings*, but the absence of the ladies was to them only the loss of a few minutes of their daily right to their society, a right to be insisted on with interest on the morrow ; while to Brandreth (who in an hour's time was to ride forth into the night, with only the memory of Alice's smiles to lighten his solitary journey, and nought but the remembered melody of her song to cheer him on the way), every minute was a thing of value. For Arthur Brandreth was very near to loving Alice Ellerton ; perhaps he did love her more than he knew himself ; and if to watch over her happiness with jealous care—to note if her cheek were a shade more pale, or her voice less steady—if to mould his opinions unconsciously upon hers, and shape his conduct according to his notion of what she most admired—were symptoms of the passion that (next to that of vanity) is the most absorbing by which our nature is beset, then Arthur loved that maiden with a true and faithful heart.

Not for worlds would he have attempted to lessen the affection that—as he was well aware—Alice felt for his friend. We will not affirm that had he entertained any doubt of the probability of her ultimate happiness as Herbert's wife, he would not have endeavoured to loosen the bonds that bound them to each other ; for Brandreth's was a singular character, and it was his habit to make his conscience a law unto himself. But although in his inmost heart he did not deem the Rector fully deserving of the prize that he had gained, he respected him too highly, and knew too well his intrinsic value not to feel certain that no after-discoveries of faults or vices hidden away in the background would tend to make him less worthy than at the present time of Alice's affections.

As for the girl's own sentiments, they were more difficult to analyse. Had any one suggested to her the possibility of her heart being occupied by two tenants at one and the same period, she would have been shocked at the immorality—nay, the coarse impropriety—of the imputation. But, nevertheless, it is to be feared that she in some sort deserved it.

Her affection for the one had grown with her youth, and

strengthened with her strength, till it had seemed to become a part of her very being ; and to lose her hold on Herbert's esteem and regard would have been to her a heavy misfortune. Moreover, all his surroundings had become endeared to her. She loved the country where he dwelt, and the pretty Rectory which was to be her home (for the trees and flowers that adorned it seemed to be already hers), while the cottagers which were the object of *his* care were likewise reckoned among the interests and responsibilities of her future life. And then his church, the organ on which on saints' days and holidays she played, and played so exquisitely that strangers came many a mile, as much to hear that celestial harmony as to admire the costly adornments of the young Rector's best beloved bride, *id est* the church, in which his soul delighted ! All these were objects of love and veneration to Alice ; and yet, unknown to herself, there was a something wanting, and that something was the love that was springing up in Brandreth's heart ; a love that her affianced husband was utterly incapable of either feeling or inspiring.

Had Arthur been cognizant of that want, he would—at least let us hope he would—have felt the peril with which his visits were fraught, and have absented himself at once and entirely from Thornleigh Abbey. He should have guessed—but, in truth, he did not—that there was danger to that young girl in a companionship with one far better fitted than was Herbert, to rouse the dormant passions in her heart ; and so feeling, he should have denied himself the luxury of her society. And Alice's own perfect innocence tended also to throw him off his guard, keeping him by her side, and thus preserving her from both the sorrow which his absence would have caused her, and from the enlightenment as to her own feelings, which might possibly have ensued. After all, it is hard to fathom the depths, or sift out the small grains of reality from the dark depths of even the purest heart, for even “innocence itself has many a wile,” and all unknown to herself, it may be, that Alice practised some of the hypocrisy that is taught by Love to women.

And so the intimacy continued, and it was not by her own will at last that they were arrested in a course which might have ended in “soiling the current of her sinless years, and turning her pure heart's purest blood to tears.”

## CHAPTER IX.

“Alas ! I have walked through life  
Too heedless where I trod ;  
Nay, helping to trample my fellow-born,  
And fill the burial sod ;  
Forgetting that even the sparrow falls  
Not unmarked by God !”—THOMAS HOOD.

“ALICE, this delicious evening is not one to waste indoors,” said Lady Thornleigh to her young sister, as together they left the dining-room on the evening when Philip and his guests discussed the wants of the poor and the requirements of the rich, beneath the perfumed shelter of the wide verandah.

“Come out into the air, come and sit with me under the tulip tree, and we will read our letters there.”

The post arrived late at Thornleigh, and a servant had just presented the letter-bag to his mistress, whose habit it was to open it with her own hands. The distribution of its contents was soon made, and then (the evening being warm) the sisters in their light gossamer dresses (and without taking the precaution of donning any extra covering), stepped out from the open window to the velvet lawn.

They were both winning objects to look upon, those two women, and the dozen years of difference in their ages was scarcely perceptible to those who caught glimpses of them from a distance. Gertrude’s fair skin and beautiful colouring gave her the semblance of youth, which was increased by the greater vivacity of her movements, while Alice, on the contrary, was quiet in the extreme, and her cheek was usually colourless ; her chief charm of person consisting in her peculiar gracefulness, and in the loving softness of her eyes.

Gertrude opened her letters with feverish haste, dropping a few steps behind her sister as she did so ; while the latter, feigning ignorance of her agitation, busied herself with proping up some rare carnations that lay drooping on their bed. Suddenly Lady Thornleigh spoke, but her voice was altered,

and she seemed as though struggling to subdue some violent and almost overpowering emotion.

“My dear Alice,” she exclaimed, “how stupid and forgetful I have been! I promised to see Mrs. Whatman at the South Lodge to-day, for her grandchild is very ill. Lend me your scarf to throw over my head; in a quarter of an hour I shall be there and back again. But quick, dear, or I shall be late, and you know how Thornleigh hates a deserted room.”

“Then pray let me go in your place, dear Gertrude,” said Alice; “I am by far the most skilful doctor of the two, and it will be better for Philip to remark on my absence than on yours.”

“And why, pray?” asked Lady Thornleigh, as she turned sharply round upon her sister.

“Why,” repeated Alice, embarrassed how to answer her, “really, Gertrude, I can hardly say, except, perhaps, because—because you are his wife.”

Conscience, or some other cause equally effective, had made a great coward of the elder sister, or she would hardly have blushed so vividly under the girl’s imagined insinuation. There was, however, no dissuading her from her design, and almost snatching at the scarf which her sister had removed from her shoulders, she hurriedly threw it over her own, and walking away at a rapid pace was soon lost to view among the trees.

For a few moments Alice stood irresolute, and then slowly and sadly turned her steps towards the house. There was a turn in her homeward path from which she could obtain a glimpse of the “South Lodge,” the place to which Gertrude had declared her errand to be, and at that turn did she instinctively (and with an anxious heart) pause for a moment, and strain her eyes in search of her absent sister.

But alas! along that road no human form was passing, so with her suspicions that all was not right with Gertrude painfully confirmed, and filled with direful apprehension that those suspicions would (in consequence of her sister’s lengthened absence) be shared by Philip, she lingered long and nervously on her way. Nervously, indeed, and painfully, for it was a very pale face that some time after made its appearance at the glass door which opened on to the lawn, and a very trembling hand that was laid on Thornleigh’s shoulder as if in propitiation. He looked into her face inquiringly.

“We have had a delicious walk,” was her answer to the

mute appeal, and then (for oh, Love, how rare are the sacrifices that a woman's heart can make for you !) she added, while her cheek blushed deeply for her own duplicity, “a delicious walk through the shrubberies ; but Gertrude was tired, and sat down to rest ; she will, however, be here immediately.” And turning to Herbert, with a rapid utterance which surprised him in one so habitually composed, she added, “I fear there is little hope of poor Jane Whatman's recovery ; her cough is worse than ever, and her breathing so oppressed that it is painful to see her.”

At that moment, and as if to arrest the course of deception so reluctantly entered upon by the truth-loving Alice, Lady Thornleigh entered the room.

In striking contrast to the appearance of that pale, agitated girl was the aspect of the world-taught woman, as she glided in amongst them ! All traces of haste and perturbation had vanished, her hair was arranged in its usual faultless braids, and the smooth white forehead was without a line or wrinkle. Truly she was an excellent dissembler, that fair-cheeked, blooming woman ! But where and in what school of design she had brought her art to such high perfection, and to what manner of apprenticeship she was indebted for the complete mastery she had obtained over her emotions, were questions (hard indeed for her to answer) that flitted across the bewildered brain of Alice Ellerton.

She gazed at her sister with wonder, but with that wonder there was mingled a delightful sensation of relief ; a relief so great that it imparted a buoyancy to her spirits, and a charm to her smile that had of late been wanting there. She did not hear Herbert question her sister as to the amount of suffering endured by the little invalid, whose days on earth were numbered ; nor was she aware of the melancholy fact that Gertrude had, on being cross-examined by her husband, distinctly attributed her lengthened absence to her visit to the dying child. All these things were lost upon Alice, inasmuch as she was too much engrossed by a conversation in which Brandreth had engaged her, to attend to the remarks of others.

Encouraged by the gentle smile that lighted up her features, „the man of progress” (for so Thornleigh called him) was already interesting her with the revelation of some of his favourite plans, while he dwelt with eager interest on the

relative social positions of the rich, richer, *richest*, as they affect those of that far larger portion of humanity, *id est*, the poor, the poorer, and the *poorest*.

“Such pity as I heard lavished yesterday,” he said, “on the poor Duke of —, ‘actually in want of money !’ But then the unfortunate man had ‘three such magnificent places to keep up,’ and his income after all was *only* eighty thousand a year ; such a tax upon him : ‘and then the Duchess Emily, the poor, dear Duchess ! a wretched ten thousand a year jointure ! what *was* that for her ? a mere *nothing* !’ Don’t laugh. I assure you I heard it all. But I confess, I had felt rather sorry for the poor *fellow* myself (you know *want* makes a man a *fellow*), when I saw him at his own house a few days ago. The cause for compassion was a different one ; but still I did pity him.”

“And why ?” asked Alice, as, seated before the piano, she made a murmuring music, which, running on softly, drowned (except to ears as near as hers) the tones of Arthur’s voice.

“Simply for this cause, namely, that I saw before me a man, scarcely past the prime of life, but who was nevertheless a martyr to that fell disease aptly called ‘aristocratic ;’ inasmuch as it really affects those who are compelled to *use*, and therefore are not able to *abuse*, the bodily and mental energies that God has given them. I saw that ‘puissant prince’ wheeled into his gorgeous dining-hall by men of giant height (methinks there were four of those sons of Anak attending to the wants of us three, for I was the only guest), and then and there I pitied the owner of all that wasted wealth.”

“But why wasted ?”

“Because, as each huge serving-man presented upon lordly dish the delicate mess, prepared at costly price, the sick man turned away his head, rejecting it in the impotence of despair. As for the Duchess, than whom I do not believe there breathes a woman with a kinder heart and better impulses, she looked at him with eyes brimming over with compassion, and entreated of him to consider whether there were nothing he could fancy, *nothing* that could tempt his dainty and fastidious appetite ?

“‘Good God !’ cried the miserable man ; ‘what do you mean ? I could eat everything on the table ; positively *everything*, but what would be the consequence ? Why, I should have this confounded gout worse again to-morrow. What a bore life is.’”

“A sad case, certainly,” said Alice, pityingly; “but after all, he was born to it.”

“No, I deny that he was born to it; true, he was born with the means of enjoying to the utmost the creature comforts about him and around him; but he was also born to the inheritance of duties, the conscientious fulfilment of which would have secured to him (in all probability) the continuance of those blessings. This *poor* Duke, with his ‘three places to keep up,’ might be a happier man now, if he had been more occupied about the comforts of others, than busied with the consideration of his own enjoyments; and possibly were the *future* of the poor upon his place a subject of greater solicitude to him here, his *own* future would be the better for it when his place shall know him no more.”

His tone was solemn, and Alice, feeling half intimidated by the grave turn which the conversation had assumed, said hesitatingly:

“You forget, I think, dear Mr. Brandreth, that it is the keeping up of these places which employs the poor, and enables them to provide for their otherwise starving families.”

“There is a text for a sermon in your last words, Miss Ellerton, although you know it not.—‘Employs the poor!’ Forgive me, pray, for echoing your words, and allow me to repeat to you some portion of a conversation which I held that day with the *indigent* Duke on this self-same subject.

“We were talking of the agricultural prospects of the country, and of the amount of wages paid in the several portions of it. The Duke averred that the labouring classes—his labourers, in short (and have you never remarked that the employer invariably seems to consider himself as the *benefactor* of the man who gives him, in exchange for silver, the sweat of his brow and all his strength and health?),—the Duke then averred that the labourers on his estate were far too highly remunerated, and were, in his opinion, growing beyond themselves. I listened to his discourse admiringly; for really, to hear him, you might have imagined that they as well as he were wont to undergo the evils consequent on repletion, and were in the habit of sending the contents of their plate untasted away.”

“How foolish and how ignorant!” exclaimed Alice.

“True; but in his excuse it may be urged, that he had been told so often, not only by his stewards and bailiffs, but by the collective opinions of the comfortable ‘well-off,’ that

the receipt of two shillings or half-a-crown a day prevented a man's being 'ill-off'; that he admitted the statement as a fact, without questioning its accuracy. I hope I shook his faith in the fabulous qualities of those thirty pieces of copper.\* I hope, too, that I did something towards persuading him that the bare means of existence are not quite so easily supplied as he imagined them to be; and that the daily requirements of six, eight, or perhaps ten human beings can hardly be adequately provided for by a sum which would do no more than suffice for the plainest of bachelor breakfasts, ordered at the least extravagant club in London."

"Ah! how true that is!" cried Alice; "but tell me more, tell me how you convinced him—tell me what the Duke said."

"Not much," continued Arthur, gratified by her eagerness; "but I hoped from his manner that he was thinking over what I had said, and that was something in a man who, by the accidents of birth and fortune, had become encrusted with self-love, and individual, though perhaps unconscious, Duke worship. It was something new to his Grace, to learn a little of the cost of those things which men and women must have or die; and to do him justice, he listened both attentively and kindly. I put the number of a cottager's household at six, a small average; do not you consider it to be so?"

"Indeed I do—four children are considered to be a very small family; in this part of the world, at least."

"Small as you may think it, it was sufficient for my purpose; and I then, having put the number of the mouths at a half-dozen, proceeded to enumerate in detail the various items required for the maintenance of the family in question.

"Rent, two shillings per week; *necessary* food, seven shillings; beer or tea, two shillings; clothing—but here I was at fault, for my budget was growing too complicated, and the deficit too alarming! There remained just four shillings and sixpence a week for all remaining expenses.

"Prodigious sum, indeed! Was it on the luxuries of life, I asked, that such a large amount of superfluous cash was to be expended? or was it for the clothing that was to make the family—what the poor call *decent*? 'Why,' I suggested,

\* Wages which in olden times would have enabled a labourer to live comfortably; but which, from the increased price in the necessaries of life, are now in many instances quite insufficient for his wants.

‘the very *highlows* in which the ill-fed labourer does your Grace’s daily work, cost him a week’s earnings ;’ and, God knows, they are soon worn through in the hard labour of his calling,—and then there is the fuel required to warm their ill-clothed bones in winter, and to boil the water for the sloe-leaves and raisin-stalks that the poor call tea. Let us allow half-a-crown for the fuel, little enough in cold and frosty weather—little enough when the wife is sick, and the baby is but one day old. And now, I asked of the *poor* Duke, as he reclined on his easy chair, and the ’41 claret (fifteen shillings a bottle, if it was *one*) gleamed through the crystal jug, now what remains to clothe this wretched family ? and from what fund are gowns and petticoats, and shoes and stockings, to be produced for the toiling, nursing mother, and for the growing, hungry children ? They cannot go about in rags like their fellows in the sister kingdom, for public opinion and their own lingering self-respect are against such a proceeding. They would be looked upon at once (did they do so) as objects of the darkest suspicion ; and society, at the sight of their tattered garments, would immediately convict them of idleness, theft, and drunkenness ; while their only fault might be—that heinous one—of being poor !

“No more work for the labouring man whose clothes are not whole and tidy—no more encouragement for the wife whose children play about in rags. Alas ! for the poor, whose wretchedness offends the delicate senses of the rich and prosperous.”

Alice had left off playing the pleasant low-toned chords, and her whole soul was in her eyes, when Brandreth’s voice sinking almost to a whisper, continued, after a pause, to impress the subject on her mind.

“And can you wonder that the young man who enters upon life with good intentions, and who takes home to his cottage a wife, whose resolution to live honestly, soberly, and diligently, are as determined as his own—can you wonder that even such a pair should fail under the pressure of events so urgent? For a while they may struggle against their fate ; and as long as the family is small they may manage to keep their heads above water ; but the increasing burthen will weigh them down at last ; and it is in this wise that so many sink, to rise in this world no more for ever.”

“But what can be done ?” asked Alice, sadly. “What *can*

be done to remedy the evil? I hear so much of ‘over-population,’ so much of the difficulty of providing for the poor. The misery and want, too, are on so great a scale, that they seem almost too vast to grapple with.”

“Vast, indeed!” said Arthur, “and therefore is the need the greater that each man of power and might should put his shoulder to the wheel—working steadily and unshinkingly in the sure and certain hope that good will follow upon his efforts, and reward them with success. Would to Heaven that the pay of the labouring man were better suited to his wants, and often to his deserts. Would to Heaven that the question were not so much and so constantly, ‘*For* what can I get my work done?’ as ‘*How much* is it my duty, as a responsible Christian man, to pay for the doing of such work?’”

“But how many there are,” said Alice, “who are glad to work for less than half-a-crown a day—glad of much less, indeed, when labour is scarce in the hard winter weather.”

“Glad! my dear Miss Ellerton; pardon me for saying that the word is ill-chosen. But even if the poor wretches be as you say, ‘*glad*,’ what does the fact prove? and should it make us forget the Scripture truth, that the labourer is worthy of his hire? Believe me, that we to whom much is given are gravely responsible, not only for the actual misery, but for the state of moral degradation into which the rapidly increasing population of our country is, in various degrees, so fearfully sinking. The absence of *hope* has the worst possible effect on the human mind, for those who have nothing to look forward to, even in this life, are indeed of all men the most miserable.”

“But what hope would you give them? Surely, if they could only have sufficient for their daily wants——”

“A great point would certainly be gained,” interrupted Arthur, too much engrossed by his subject to attend to the strict rules of colloquial etiquette; “but in my opinion much more than this is required. To be blessed in our own persons, and in those of our children after us, is the natural longing of the human heart; one of the characteristics of our species indeed, which raises us above the nature of the beasts that perish. Without hope for the future, and without the prospect of some ultimate advantage or social improvement in his condition, a human being must become lowered in mind, and crushed out of all healthfulness of feeling. If the spring, which *ought* to rise responsive in the human breast, be dried up, what

is to support him through his trials and his labours ? and what is to keep him from wandering into crooked paths in search of poisonous wells, from which to draw support and consolation ? Believe me, that a man can give no better security for the honest discharge of his duty, than the hope of leaving an untarnished name to the children he has laboured for.

“Believe, too, that one of the most certain causes of his moral degradation is his conviction, that though he rise ever so early, and take his rest ever so late—that though his scanty bread be always that of carefulness—he can, at the very best of times, earn barely enough to keep the souls and bodies of his family together ; while as old age creeps on, and pinching penury increases with it—when the power, in short, to work fails him—what is it he sees by way of termination to the prospect ? What but the dreaded workhouse home—the hated Union ! The last sad refuge of the pauper, who could not lay by a something in the days of his strength, to support him when that strength at last fails him !”

“And no better prospect for his children after him ! No wonder that he should become hard, and savage, and discontented !”

“No wonder, indeed ! and what right have we to visit with unmitigated condemnation those faults and vices, to the committal of which the poor are so frequently driven by the selfishness of the rich ? It cannot be doubted, that to devise and to carry into effect a perfect plan for the thorough and lasting improvement in the moral and physical condition of the poor, is a task almost beyond the physical powers of a Hercules, the ingenious calculations of a Gladstone, and the large philanthropy of a Howard, even were such qualities to be found united in each individual of a conclave of earnest men sitting in committee to consider the subject ; but because the work is a difficult one, should it be abandoned as impossible ? There is much to be done by individual exertion, and were each rich man to do something—each great or small landlord to make (what no one will do), namely, some personal sacrifice of a luxury, or, what is still more difficult, of a display gratifying to his vanity—much (as I said before) might be done. Above all, let them live among the poor, and within the call of the poor. Let them take the work which God has given them to do *into* their own hands, and *out* of those of their hireling ministers. Let every encouragement be given to those who

show a wish to reform ; and let them be paid so well, that the idle and the vicious may be led to think it good policy to amend, and to endeavour to become better members of society. Let them break down the high and solid wall that has been built by reason of our aristocratic instincts, to defend ourselves from the possible incursions of the ‘lower orders ;’ and thus, by showing the real interest which we must learn to *feel* in the poor man’s welfare, we may hope to do much towards raising the moral character of a class that is, I greatly fear, deteriorating day by day.”

“And a class, too, that includes such an enormous proportion of the population,” said Alice ; “human souls reckoned by millions.”

“Yes ; by millions, indeed ! Millions of souls, which, if there be truth in Scripture—nay, do not deem that I imply a doubt—if there *be* truth in Scripture, we may believe are given as *charges* into the hands of the rich. Would it be no comfort, think you, to a man upon his deathbed to feel that he could say boldly to his God, ‘Of those whom thou gavest me, have I lost none ?’ Would it be no satisfaction to the rich man, while he lies stretched upon the couch from which he is to rise no more, and while hastening to the grave where his heaped-up thousands can avail him nothing—would it then afford him no satisfaction to reflect that he had, by the sacrifice of some few luxuries, saved one soul from death, and thereby possibly covered a multitude of sins ? When I hear of a mighty man of gold—(Lord Bunkerhead, for instance)—as a nobleman of simple habits, who, though the possessor of untold millions, limits his expenditure to some twenty thousand pounds a year—I ask, What use does my Lord Bunkerhead make of his superfluous cash ? and the answer comes readily enough. To the columns of the ‘Times’ I am instructed to look ; and there, surely enough, occasionally I find his Lordship’s title, with donations of perhaps one hundred—fifty—thirty pounds (as the case may be) figuring after it. But what are those trifling sums compared with the millions which, I am told, are still at the disposal of this nobleman of simple tastes and charitable instincts ? The fact that such sums are in his coffers is, I fancy, as undeniable as that, during the last year in London, no less than three hundred persons died from want of the common necessities of life ! died of starvation, in short. Not actually at the gate of Dives, for we have a police, who do not

suffer the eyes of Dives to be shocked by the spectacle of the poor man's sores, but not far away, nevertheless—near enough almost to have been heard—near enough to have been succoured, if only a hand had been stretched out to save !”

He paused for breath ; for having spoken out of the fulness of his heart, the words had poured forth in a rapid stream. Women prefer a fact to an argument, and are better satisfied to draw their deductions from the former than to follow the latter through the devious paths of another's brain ; and it was therefore by a recurrence to an assertion of Arthur's that touched upon experiences of her own, that Alice showed him she had listened to and agreed with him.

“ How painfully true,” she said, sadly, “ is all you say ; and how few, how very few of us are capable of positive self-denial, for the sake of those who are in distress ! I have felt this often in my own case. I give my shillings and sixpences gladly when there are plenty of them in my purse ; but when it becomes a question as to who shall have my solitary five-pound note—whether the wretched family who owe their rent and baker's bill, or the dressmaker who wears gold bracelets and keeps a ‘page’—alas ! the mental struggle is often but of short duration : for the giving up of the new dress appears in the light of an impossibility, and the unhappy cottager is left unaided. It is very wicked—very cruel ; but I greatly fear that such instances are (as you say) far too common.”

She looked up to Arthur's face as she said those last words, and what was it that she saw there that sent the rich blood mantling over her cheek and brow ? What was it that caused her girlish bosom to heave so visibly beneath the muslin by which it was shrouded ? Ask her. She would strive in vain to answer you ; but he is not so ignorant, for he is leaning over her more nearly now, and perhaps knows well that it was but another of love's lessons in hypocrisy that taught her once more to let her fingers wander over the ivory keys, while with every pulse throbbing she listened to his words.

“ And can you always answer your *heart's* questions as readily as those your conscience puts to you ? ”

He was close to her now, so close that his breath was felt upon her flushed cheek. She did not answer, but the mournful notes spoke for her, and he saw how the fingers trembled as they slowly drew out those friendly chords. There was a fierce battle in his heart ; a battle which, like many a great one before

it, might have ended differently but for the timely arrival of reinforcements.

On the present occasion, the succour came in the person of the Rector, who, leaving his place at the window, and tired, perhaps, of the conversation with his hostess, whom he always believed to be “clothed with *falsehood*, as with a garment,” was seen slowly approaching the pair, whose dialogue had assumed a character so interesting to themselves.

Brandreth’s eye was the first to perceive the advance of the friend whose interests (so his conscience whispered him) he had begun to undermine ; but the room was a long one, and he had time to say, after drawing himself up with a hard-drawn breath,—

“Here comes a happy man ! What think you ? Do truths profane, as well as those divine, come mended from his tongue ?”

The remark and the question were utterly at variance with the character of the man ; but there are moments—and this was one of them—when the tongue is scarcely answerable for the words it utters. Alice felt the incongruity and indiscretion of that eager whisper ; and, moreover, there was a lurking satire in Arthur’s tone that pained her, both for Herbert and for herself : still, however, she was not angry, but only struck mute with an agitation she could not understand, and which, woman-like, she at once succeeded in concealing. In a moment a comparison was drawn in that young girl’s mind between the two men who loved her ; and it was decided at once in favour of the one to whom her faith had not been pledged, and to whom she owed no duty. It was, perhaps, scarcely fair to weigh their merits then, for after listening to the feverish breath of passion, tame and uninteresting must have seemed the measured words dictated by a heart at ease !

Herbert usually spoke well, but rarely impulsively, and his habitual manner to Alice more nearly resembled that of a husband or brother, than the devoted attention usually paid by an affianced lover. Moreover, nature had not endowed him with the dangerous power of fascination, both of voice and eye, which she had lavished upon the man whom we hardly like to call his rival ; and so it was, that when leaning over the instrument, Francis Herbert made some commonplace remark upon the beauty of the night, Alice listened as though she heard him not. Silence would at that moment have been most welcome

to her ; for, even as *fairy lights* send the panting traveller quickly home to dwell on the wonders he has seen, so would she rather than remain to smile at her lover's platitudes, have sought her chamber's solitude, and there have gazed in fancy on the new star which had arisen in the heaven of her life.

For to Alice, who had just caught her first glimpse of a hitherto unimagined world, life did indeed appear to be a heaven of happiness and love ! It was hardly in the power of the man who possessed her *sisterly* affection to deaden by his presence the glow which incipient passion was kindling in her fresh young heart ; and when, soon after, their voices mingled in the melody of song, Alice felt that there was more music for her ear in a few low-murmured tones from Arthur's lips, than in the studied notes of Herbert's practised but unsuggestive voice.

When the time for parting came, they—the five who had spent that summer day together—stood grouped side by side upon the lawn, looking on the lovely star-bespangled sky.

The moon was shining, not continuously, but at intervals, between the slowly passing clouds. On the white sun-dial slept the shadow of a tall, straight, cypress-tree ; while, within a stone's throw, the nightingale sang as though his little heart were in his throat, to the accompaniment of the gently rustling leaves as they were stirred by the soft summer air.

Arthur Brandreth, as he stood near Alice, murmured in his soft, rich baritone, the concluding words of the last song that she had sung to him :

“Dream thou—and from thy sleep then wake to weep.”

“Do you often sing those words ?” he whispered to her, “those mournful words ?” and then, encouraged by her silence, he repeated the first stanza of Shelley's exquisite “Mutability : ”

“The flower that smiles to-day,  
To-morrow dies ;  
All that we wish to stay  
Tempts and then flies.  
What is this world's delight ?  
Lightning that mocks the sight,  
Brief even as bright.”

“And see,” he added, pointing to a distant opening among the woods, “see, there is summer lightning now, far in the

distant west, come to illustrate the verse of the immortal poet. It is a thing I love to look upon, among the many lovely ones that mock the sight.”

“I enjoy far more, watching the savage, forked flashes as they dart across the blackened sky,” said Alice.

“Of course you do,” said Arthur, playfully; “all women like excitement. It is a case of spasm *versus* sense. But I must say ‘good night,’ for the air is growing chilly, and your scarf is but a poor protection from the cold;” and as he spoke he closed the light garment over her throat, with almost a lover’s care.

Alice permitted the attention, for in truth she seemed as one powerless in his hands. It was love’s own hour, and she sank for a brief space under its dominion. The pressure, strong yet gentle, of Brandreth’s muscular hand did not (as he bade her “farewell”) remain unanswered; nay, as to herself, in the silent watches of the night, she shyly owned, she even clung to his grasp when he would have withdrawn his own, and saw him go at last with an unconsenting heart.

Contrasted with that lingering passionate pressure came the slight touch of Herbert’s thin and meaningless fingers: and what wonder that their contact seemed cold and hard? What wonder that, in defiance of every effort to drive it from her memory, Arthur’s image haunted her through the sleepless night, and was hovering near her pillow when the sun awoke her from her late and troubled slumbers?

And here it is possible that many a commentator on female virtue will rise up against the hapless Alice, and condemn her. “A forward, vicious-minded girl,” they will probably say, “who for a few ardent looks, and some sentimental words whispered in her ear by a good-looking and unprincipled man, allowed her affections to wander from the excellent clergyman whose wife she has promised to be! A very shocking young woman indeed, and one whose example should be held up to general reprobation.”

But is there nothing that (to these uncompromising critics) can be urged in defence of the fickle, foolish girl? Something, perhaps, *might* be said, were it nothing better than the oft-repeated truism that human nature *is* human nature, and never more completely so than in a young girl of eighteen. Then, too, it may be suggested that Alice was taken by surprise, and fell unawares into the snare. Had she indulged in the luxury

of dangerous reveries—dangerous because bringing with them the longing for the forbidden fruit—and had she striven to retain the remembrance of Arthur's gaze, or repeated to herself in solitude the words that he had whispered, then would we give her up at once to the castigation of her virtuous sisters. But Alice did none of these things ; and, therefore, let us hope that the Recording Angel will pass lightly over her momentary fault and almost unconscious trespass. But for those who—whether from the paucity of temptation, the absence of opportunity, or from the blessing of a colder temperament—have never felt their hearts beat more wildly than decorum warrants, what is the most fitting duty ? Is it not to thank their God, with meek reverence, that *their* lives have been set in smoother places ? And should they not, while flinging from their hands the accusing stones, build up in their hearts a monument, pure as unsullied marble, to those who, when they were tempted, have yet found a way to escape ?

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## CHAPTER X.

“But alas ! to make me  
The fixed figure for the Time of Scorn  
To point his slow, unmoving finger at.”

SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN the sisters met on the following morning, it was easy for Alice to see on Lady Thornleigh's careworn face traces of the sleepless night that she had passed. The evening-light had been favourable to the concealment of her altered countenance ; but in broad day, and with the morning-sun shining on and revealing its secrets, that countenance told a tale which Alice shrank from reading. Her eyes were turned often and anxiously towards the door, and once she asked her sister if she had seen Philip, or knew in what direction he had turned his steps for his customary early walk.

The words were hardly uttered when her husband hastily entered. He walked straight up to the speaker, and then, stopping short, looked steadily into her eyes. There was mischief and menace in his fixed gaze, and Lady Thornleigh turned pale beneath it.

“ You informed me that you walked to the South Lodge last night,” he said ; and his tone was not more reassuring than his manner.

“ I did,” she answered ; but the words were barely audible, and he turned from her in disgust.

“ I was a fool,” he said, “ to look for truth ; but by —, I loathe a lie like h— ! ”

“ Oh, Philip,” interposed Alice, “ what shocking words ! ”

“ Applied to a shocking thing : but I beg your pardon for using them, and shall endeavour to choose my expletives from a young lady’s vocabulary. To begin then, was it *nice* of your sister to make use of that delicate little artifice last night ?—and was it *dear* of her to receive pretty little notes, and to read them by the river-side ? And by Heaven ! ” he continued, gradually lashing himself into fury, “ it was an accursed thing to meet a man there at night, and make”—but Alice’s hand was on his lips, and her ears were not sullied by the coarse words so nearly spoken.

The action seemed to sober him ; for he added more calmly, “ Leave us, Alice ; this is no scene for you to witness. Nay,” he continued, seeing that she hesitated to obey him, “ your curiosity will soon be gratified, for your sister’s shame must become a public scandal now.”

Lady Thornleigh almost shrieked. “ Cruel ! most cruel ! ” she cried. “ But do not leave me, Alice. I implore, I entreat of you to remain ;” and she clung convulsively to her sister’s dress. So urgent was her appeal, and so manifest was her terror, that Philip could almost have pitied her, despite the bitter contempt that was apparent both in his voice and countenance when he again addressed her.

“ Wretched, degraded woman ! ” he said, “ you have mistaken your vocation strangely, for you have not the courage to stand forth and face the consequences of your vice. But you have nothing to fear from me,” he continued, looking down upon her writhing form. “ You do not imagine, I suppose, that I have lost my senses, and would lift my hand against a woman ? Go, Alice,”—and this time she, fearing any longer to disobey him, crept from the room, and the trembling wife was left alone with her accuser.

He drew a piece of paper from his breast-pocket, and held it open before her.

“ Do you recognise the writing ? ” he asked.

Silence!—but a silence that was more eloquent than words—was her only answer.

There were but a few lines traced on that condemning page; but to Thornleigh's mind they had seemed conclusive. They were these:—

“Meet me at the usual hour and at the usual place. If I do not find you *under the lime-trees by the riverside at nine*, I will wait for half an hour, and then conclude from your absence that the difficulties have been for the moment insuperable.”

There was no signature affixed, and the half-sheet of paper on which the words were written was evidently the concluding portion of a letter, the remainder of which was probably still within the envelope.

This most terrible evidence had been found by Philip as he walked along the river-side. The paper was wet with dew, and had been read by him with feelings that are more easily imagined than described. A few questions asked of and answered by the grandmother of the sick child, convinced him that the story of the visit to the Lodge was a fabrication; and, furnished with these “damning proofs” (as he considered them) of his wife's guilt, he returned to the house, fraught with the direst projects of vengeance.

“And pray, may I inquire,” he asked in a tone ominous from its enforced calmness, “where the rest of this precious letter is to be found?”

“It is destroyed—indeed it is! But let not that convict me, for I am innocent; I swear it before God, and by all my hopes of mercy. It was money that the man required, money that I had not to give, and I wrote to tell him so.”

“And you expect me to believe this story? What a fool you must think me!”

“Oh! Philip, what *can* I say to convince you of my truth?”

“Nothing. I shall take my own course. I shall find this man, and kill him as I would a dog. And as for you——”

But a sudden inspiration saved Gertrude from the sentence about to be pronounced upon her.

“Stay!” she cried; “I have not lost everything, for I have still a written evidence in my favour. Here is my answer. I was too late last night, and the man had gone; but I wrote this on my return; read it and believe me.”

He took an undirected envelope from her shaking hands, and opening it read as follows:—

“I am very sorry,—pray believe that I have done my best. I have left no means untried to obtain the money ; and if I succeed later (as I hope to do), I will write to you as before.”

This was all. It was lowering, and doubtless mortifying, to Philip’s pride to think that such a missive should have been written by *his* wife to any man ; but the correspondence was certainly not that of lovers, mysterious and questionable as it certainly appeared. Philip returned the letter to Gertrude without a comment on its contents.

“And now you will have the goodness to direct it,” he said quietly.

But—alas for the credit of that sex that includes more than half of the civilized world !—the old French proverb that “*Le renard est bien rusé, mais la femme est plus rusée que le renard,*” is as true now as it was when, in the Garden of Eden, the brute creation was first made subject to man. Sir Philip Thornleigh perhaps fancied he had hit upon an ingenious device when, placing a pen between his wife’s trembling fingers, he bade her write the name and address of the correspondent whose whereabouts it was her interest to conceal. He did not reckon on the wondrous rapidity of invention, which, joined to extraordinary command over the countenance, are among the especial gifts of women ; and so, little guessing that the direction which he had so carefully secured contained not one single letter of the name and address of the man on whom he meant to heap such signal vengeance, he put the note into his pocket-book, and left his unhappy wife to her reflections.

It is almost needless to say that the writer of the obnoxious letter found by the river’s bank was not on that occasion discovered by the deceived and indignant husband, diligently as he was sought for by the latter : and so in process of time the storm blew over, and this painful episode in the life of Lady Thornleigh *seemed* to be forgotten by all but her, for there were the children’s interests to be considered, and the *name* at least of their mother to be guarded from reproach.

Philip was one who loved a peaceful life, and he therefore endeavoured to persuade himself that his wife was imprudent merely—thoughtless perhaps, anything rather than guilty ; and Gertrude had not (after a while) found much difficulty in convincing him that the man (at whose disappearance she affected much surprise) was a needy adventurer, to whom the

relation whose home she had once shared abroad had promised money in her name.

Her relation was, she said, in his power—had sworn her to secrecy ; and how, she asked, could she betray the secrets of the friend who had trusted her ? A thousand times rather would she take upon herself unmerited blame than be guilty of a deed so base !

By these and similar allusions she contrived to wrap the whole transaction in a shroud of mystery impenetrable to those about her : but while thus employed, she grew very cautious, and as her caution increased so also did the pallor of her cheek and the emaciation of her now attenuated form. It was only Alice who guessed how much she suffered—only Alice who marked her silent tears, and suspected the hollowness of her forced smiles ; and often did the girl implore her sister to pour her sorrows into her loving heart, that so they might share the burthen of them together, but Gertrude would only shake her head, and say mournfully :

“ Do not ask me, darling. I have promised and vowed, and I must keep my word ; besides, it is *too late* for frankness now. There was a time when—but why should I say this to you, dearest ? The day will come—but I shall be in my quiet grave then—when you will know the truth, and will confess that I have been more sinned against than sinning, that I have been weak rather than wicked. But I have one comfort, and that is, that your love will never fail me ; for you know that I may claim that love, and that I could not lie down to sleep, praying, longing for the death that will not come, were my conscience burthened with the guilt of having betrayed my husband. Alice, tell me that you believe me.”

And the trusting girl, with a broken voice, would give her the one comfort that she craved, and their tears mingling together, were divested of half their bitterness.

And thus between three and four years passed over their heads,—years during which but two circumstances occurred to greatly increase the painful curiosity felt by Alice on her sister’s account. Of these two events (which, though small in themselves, perplexed her greatly), the first took place about a year after the scene that has just been narrated.

Lady Thornleigh was absent from home, having gone on a visit to her mother at Mainwaring Hall, and Alice was alone in the drawing-room at the Abbey,—in that pretty cheerful

room, with its French windows, through which, but a short twelvemonth before, she, and one who was now far away, had wandered forth on a lovely summer night to gaze upon its beauties. She was occupied according to her wont, for idleness was not in her nature, and her task was now to fill the flower-vases with fresh blossoms in honour of her sister's expected return.

Suddenly she ceased from her occupation, and the flower she held fell from her fingers to the ground.

What was it that made her turn her head so quickly, and glare with such wide-open eyes upon the window? What but a sound so harsh and unnatural, that it made her very blood run cold within her veins! What but a sight that, while it filled her with horror and disgust, yet kept her eyes riveted upon it with a kind of terrible fascination! From a thing in human shape that cry had come which seemed so little human; and as Alice, with feet that seemed riveted to the ground, faced the window where it stood, it stared and gibbered at her! The vision passed away as suddenly as it had come, and then the poor child breathed again; but her nerves were shaken, and her loneliness appalled her. Again and again there rose before her in imagination that hideous face, thick-lipped and blear-eyed, with its idiot laugh and guttural cry. The age of the unhappy being was difficult to guess at accurately, but he was young, possibly not more than twelve years of age, but short and obese in person, and altogether of so pitiable an aspect, that Alice, as she thought upon him, blamed herself for the horror she had felt.

The trembling girl was but just beginning to recover from the shock she had experienced, when Lady Thornleigh (without any previous warning of her approach) glided softly into the room.

Very pale she was, that cold and meagre woman—so pale, indeed, and ghastly, that but for the red spot upon one clay-white cheek, she might have passed for a walking corpse.

“Good Heavens! Gertrude, what has happened? You are ill,” cried Alice, so alarmed at her sister's looks, that she at once forgot her own perturbation.

“Not ill; only cold,” and she sat down shivering.

“Cold! this oppressive summer day! Gertrude, it must, I fear, be the chill of coming illness.”

Instead of replying, the miserable woman looked up in the

girl's face with a faint quivering smile, that pained her to the heart.

“Oh! what can I do?” she cried, in increased alarm. “Shall I send for Philip? Shall I seek for help?”

“It is needless; I shall be better soon. It is but a chill,” and she pressed the gentle hand that held her own to her cold lips and burning brow. At last tears came, and then, and not till then, did she speak coherently and calmly.

A day elapsed ere Alice—for her sister's nerves were weak—ventured to make allusion to the frightful visitant who had troubled her in her solitude. She did not spare him in her description, for, woman-like, she (though almost unwittingly) exaggerated the feeling of repulsion and disgust that had oppressed her at the sight of the idiot boy.

As she spoke, Gertrude listened at first with an eagerness almost disproportioned to the subject; but as she proceeded in her portraiture of the miserable object, the narrator was surprised to see large tears gathering in her sister's eyes, and rolling slowly down her wasted cheeks.

She did not speak till the description of the afflicted being was ended; but then she sighed heavily and, in a low and smothered voice, said:

“May God pity him!”

Once more during her stay at Thornleigh did Alice's eyes rest upon that hapless boy; but he was older then, with a face still more bloated and repulsive, and a form more spread and muscular. It was in her walk she passed him, but he saw her not as, with shaking, feeble knees, she kept behind the trees to watch him where he went. She did not linger long, for, advancing stealthily towards the idiot among the low brushwood, she perceived the figure of a woman, and that woman (almost impossible as it seemed) was Gertrude.

During the years that Alice passed in joy and in sorrow, in doubt and sometimes in hope, at Thornleigh Abbey, Francis Herbert had repeatedly urged his suit, and pressed her to become his wife. It was not only that in his lonely home he longed for her companionship, but that having, as has been said, but a poor opinion of the elder sister, he was anxious to remove his betrothed from her influence and example. Herbert had (as has been shown) but little toleration for the weaknesses of others; and having begun by deciding that Lady Thornleigh was a flirting wife, of the giddiest and most frivolous

description, he had ended by holding her up as a warning to Alice, and as a melancholy example of the ultimate condition of women who indulge in vanities and follies. He had no mercy on, and he professed no feeling for, the worn and ailing being, whose maladies were (he was convinced) as much the offspring of her own imagination, as the result of her selfish and morbid craving after excitement.

But, reason with and entreat her as he would, his promised bride could not be induced to desert her sister. While Gertrude was ill and unhappy, her place was, she maintained, at the joyless woman's side ; and much as she respected Herbert's opinion, and grieved as she was to pain him, he failed in turning her from her purpose.

Meanwhile, the children had become an increasing source of interest and amusement to their parents ; for the important heir to the title and estates, the little Edgar, who was now nearly nine years old, was often allowed the happy privilege of trotting on his pony by Sir Philip's side when the latter rode to cover ; while his daughter, the pretty delicate Marie, was the constant and favourite plaything of her father in his home and leisure hours. The last kiss was for her, and the first morning smile was sacred to the child whose sunny curls were so often pressed in childish tenderness against her father's breast.

But as the children grew in grace and beauty, so also grew and spread the little cloud, at first no bigger than a man's hand, that was darkening the sky above their heads. The storm was long gathering, but it broke at last, and the thunderbolt descended on the house.

There was no Arthur now to counteract, by his genial presence and by the exposition of his expanded views, the influence which Herbert, with his stern and somewhat narrow-minded ideas of our reciprocal duties, was beginning to exercise over Thornleigh's mind and actions ; for the place which Arthur had once occupied had long been empty—empty since the day when his conscience whispered to him that he had come too near to his friend's affianced bride.

A note, friendly but nothing more, had one day reached the Abbey, and in it the writer bade the family a long farewell. He was going abroad, he wrote : his only sister was ill—dying, indeed, he feared—and had entreated him to come to her. He concluded with kindly wishes for the happiness of all, but made

no especial allusion to Alice. The letter was addressed to Lady Thornleigh, by whom it was read aloud ; and then its contents, having been duly commented on, were, except by one of the party, forgotten.

It was long ere Alice could quite draw the veil of forgetfulness across the image of the man whom, in her inmost heart, she almost reproached as having deserted her. And then, during the sunny summer, so many things recalled him to her memory ! The scent of the honeysuckle, so sweet after the close of night, the song of the birds, and all the busy voices of the season, reminded her eloquently of Arthur. But after awhile, pride stepped forward and told her she must forget him. At first it was a whisper only, and scarcely heard ; for his voice and touch were still fresh within her recollection. But as the weeks and months wore on, the picture faded, and other images filled up the place where his had been.

It is a fact that a woman does not readily pardon the voluntary absence which she considers as in some sort a slight to her personal charms ; nor is the virtue of self-command, when exemplified by a lover's abstaining from her society, ever properly appreciated by her over whose safety he is watching.

But there came a time of great sorrow and heavy trial, and then Alice's thoughts almost involuntarily returned towards her nearly-forgotten friend—that friend who seemed to her in absence as the only one able to afford either consolation or assistance.

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## CHAPTER XI.

“*In dubiis benigniora semper sunt præferenda.*”  
JUS. ANTIQ.

THE season was winter, but winter in its mildest form, and wearing its most benignant aspect. In the “open weather” of that frostless January, spring-flowers began to peep out upon the beds, and buds to swell upon the boughs ; while the poor rejoiced in a season that allowed them to work, and the rich in one that did not materially interfere with their enjoyments.

It was a hunting morning ; and as the “meet” was a distant

one, Philip mounted his hack early to ride to cover. Alice was watching his departure, and waving a salutation to him from the open window of her dressing-room. He looked up, and after returning her silent greeting with a gay smile, put spurs to his horse, and rode briskly away.

The anxious girl sighed as she closed the casement.

“Oh,” thought she, while recalling the expression of his kind handsome face, “how happy they might still be, if only——!”

But we must leave the dreamer to her own wistful fancies, and follow Thornleigh on his way, or rather, it should be said, on his return—for it is with that we have to do.

Late in the afternoon two men, both in hunting costume, might have been seen slowly approaching a little inn, that, standing at a short distance from the high-road, was about seven miles from the Abbey. Of those men one, the elder of the two, was on horseback, and the other on foot, leading a lame and jaded horse.

“What a bore,” said the pedestrian, whose name was Owen, —“what a bore to have to wait while that confounded smith puts the shoe on! I never was in such a rage in my life.”

“My dear Jack,” said his companion, who was no other than Thornleigh, “you are like many an angry man, ‘confounding’ the wrong person. It’s the General’s fault; he should have a better head-man in his stables. I’ve told him so a hundred times.”

“I am as well aware of that fact as you can be; but you know one can’t exactly ‘confound’ one’s governor.”

“Can’t one?” asked Philip drily, for he had more than once seen the said “governor” not a little astonished—to say the least of it—by the “young man of the present day” who was walking by his side.

But by this time they had reached the entrance to the inn-yard, and Philip was in the act of dismounting, when his attention was claimed by “Jack,” who insisted on his sharing in the astonishment felt by him at the sight of a strange and uncouth figure, around which several idlers were assembled.

The object of their curiosity was a youth, who *might* be about seventeen years of age; but he was so singularly and disproportionately shaped, and what was seen of his face (for it was half-concealed by a “comforter,” and a bandage passed under his chin) was so little indicative of his time of life, that

any conjectures as to his age were likely to be considerably removed from the truth. He was seated in that badge of respectability called a “gig,” and was, in a somewhat *animal* fashion (for he was tearing the food asunder with his teeth, and gorging himself with it greedily), eating his afternoon meal, to his own great apparent satisfaction.

“How revolting!” said Owen, with disgust.

“Poor devil!” whispered Philip, compassionately; “he is an idiot—come away. Don’t stare at him.”

“I’m looking at the horse,” said Jack, who felt rather ashamed of the curiosity he had manifested; “a strong, good-shaped brute—the one in harness I mean, not the beast who’s having his feed.”

Thornleigh was by this time in the house.

“Beg your pardon, Sir Philip,” said the innkeeper, both respectfully and regretfully, as the former was striding rapidly forward towards the only sitting-room of which his house could boast, and which “looked out” (as the saying is) on the small garden at the back—“beg your pardon, Sir Philip, but I’m afraid it’s out of the question your going in there: there’s a lady and a gentleman within as was very particular not to be disturbed.”

“What a nuisance!” exclaimed Jack.

“Not at all; this room is quite large enough to kick your heels in, and I have a note to write which I had forgotten;” and calling for pen and paper, Philip was soon absorbed in his occupation.

Meanwhile there remained for the impatient Owen no better resource than that of staring out upon the inn-yard, and listlessly watching the proceedings of the ostler and stable-boys. Not long, however, had he to wait for an “event;” for before ten minutes had elapsed, Philip was aroused by an exclamation of—

“There he goes! the fellow that was in the room. He isn’t a gentleman, though; I should say a kind of heavy-swell, commercial gent. And, by Jove! he’s going away in the gig with the idiot. Nice boy that would be in buttons, or in a neat livery and buckskins. What fun!”

But Thornleigh was too much occupied to listen to his chatter; and it was not till the “fast” young guardsman followed up his information with the more interesting remark that “the female party was turning out,” and that “by the

powers !” she was a “stunner,” that he left his employment, and joined his friend Jack at the window. Far out of the open casement were stretched the head and shoulders of the now fully-aroused young man, as he lent forward to obtain a better view of the lady’s retreating figure. Of her *face* he could discern nothing, as the very thickest of veils hid every feature from his sight; but of little avail was that attempt at concealment, in so far as regarded one of those who stood there watching her; for Philip Thornleigh had at once recognised the woman as his wife! Figure, dress, and walk, were alike unmistakable, for all were peculiar, and all were familiar to him as his own name. Then suspicion darkened into conviction, and then there broke from between his set teeth as heavy a curse as has ever burst from the lips of mortal man!

Owen looked up in his face wonderingly, and would have spoken, but that a hand was laid heavily on his shoulder, and the fingers dug so deep into his muscles that he shrank back in pain and anger. In another minute he was alone, and listening to the hoofs of Philip’s horse, as they thundered along his homeward road.

“What a bore!” soliloquized the guardsman, as the ostler, after a touch of his cap, suggested for his consideration that Sir Philip, having ridden away in a hurry-like, had omitted the customary remuneration for his services. “What a deuce of a bore, and I hate riding alone too!” But nevertheless he generously threw a sixpence at the man’s uncurlycombed head, and then rode away at a moderate pace in the direction of the Abbey.

This history is at present a retrospective one, and for that reason, but not for that alone, it shall be left to the imagination of the reader to picture forth the scenes that were enacted on the return of Sir Philip Thornleigh to his home. It will excite no surprise that he was alike deaf to his wife’s agonised assurances of her innocence, and to Alice’s prayers to him for mercy. In vain did friends, kind and zealous, interfere in the behalf of the woman, against whom they could not deny that appearances were strongly arrayed! In vain did Alice (and those who knew, through her means, some of the singular circumstances connected with the affair) relate those circumstances to the inexorable husband, dwelling strongly on the appearance amongst them of the idiot boy, in proof that some strange and yet-to-be-discovered mystery of crime, lay beneath

the apparent (but as yet unproved) guilt of the miserable wife! All was against her. Presuming on the lengthened absence of her husband, she had made, and kept, an assignation with a man who was a stranger to him—one also to whose whereabouts she refused to give a clue; and these things being so, no asseverations of hers could weigh against the deed that she had done.

Very terrible were the hours spent by that distracted household during the night that followed on that dread discovery. The little children in their beds slept peaceably, unconscious of the raging storm; but in his chamber, lashed into a fury almost too great for words, the wretched father raved on in his wrath, while Gertrude knelt in silent despair beside her sleeping children: and Alice, now bending over her in a vain attempt at consolation, and now venturing into Thornleigh's presence with a faint but ever-recurring hope that he might be induced to stay his hand, was as a ministering angel in the house.

And during those sad hours, the preparations for departure were (by Philip's order) being rapidly, but surely made. Among the first of his frantic acts had been that of searching, among his wife's letters and papers, for written evidences of her guilt; but these he failed to obtain, nor was there much among those hoarded relics to throw a light on the dark mystery of the transaction; but there was that which touched poor Philip more sorely still, and filled his bitter cup to overflowing. There was a handwriting that he well remembered—one that, though seen before but once, was too peculiar to be mistaken; and in that writing was many a scrap of paper found by him among Gertrude's letters, and alas! for what remained to him of happiness, there were dates which proved that her intimacy with the writer had existed before his own ill-fated marriage!

Yes—all hopes of home-felicity did indeed seem over for the injured husband; nor could the joy of a father, in the children that his wife had given him, be any longer his. Cold as a stone grew his heart, as he thought on the shame that she had brought upon him; and when he remembered the children that he had loved, doubt and suspicion hardened him even against those innocent ones!

At last the day dawned that succeeded to that night of wretchedness; and by the first light of a pale winter's sun,

Gertrude and all that she dared to call her own looked their last upon the well-loved walls of Thornleigh Abbey. Edgar and the little Marie were led, cold, weeping, and bewildered, to the carriage which was to convey them from the home they loved ; and when the sound of the wheels died away, and Philip realised that in that home no merry childish voices would ring again through the echoing passages, and no pleasant woman's greeting would gladden him on his return, or bid him the cheerful “good-morrow” that he loved to hear, then he felt desolate indeed !

Very shamed, and very “awkward,” did that proud man feel when, seated at his solitary meal, he longed to bid the busy servants leave him to himself, nor harass him longer with their customary attentions. But he dared not do it. A very slave was he (as, indeed, we all are) to the opinions even of the “lowest ;” and so the daily routine of service went its course : nor was it till the door had closed upon the last retreating footstep, that the solitary man (bowing his head upon his folded arms) gave way to his deep emotion. Truly lonely indeed he was, as he stood there on his deserted hearth, and mused on the mournful traces of that devastating tempest ; for though the violence of the storm had passed away, the iron of the fallen thunderbolt had entered into his soul.

For awhile he shut himself up in total seclusion, feeling no wish for sympathy, and shrinking with the sensitiveness of a proud nature from the sight either of friends or acquaintances : but Herbert at length (by persevering efforts) succeeded in breaking through a barrier which at first seemed insurmountable ; and when once he had established himself as an admitted guest, his visits were long and frequent. But neither in his capacity of friend or minister would Philip allow him to handle the subject of his great shame and dire bereavement. He gave no ear to his counsels, and would have none of his reproof ; for the wound from which he suffered was still a recent one, and required to be touched with a hand far more gentle than that of the stern and unsympathising practitioner, who stood with probe and scalpel ready for his work. There is a species of mental chloroform, which some men and many women do not (when necessity bids them search to the quick the deep wounds of the heart) disdain to make use of ; but of such merciful dealers with human sorrows Francis Herbert was not one : and

feeling this, Philip, though he tolerated his presence, refused to admit him to his confidence.

Meanwhile the exiled ones, with the little children, went out into the desert ; for a desert did the world indeed seem to those hopeless, frightened women. It was to the Continent they bent their steps ; nor did they pause till in the little-known wilds of Lower Brittany they found a humble and obscure retreat. Far removed from town, or even village, was the tiny château (buried among trees) to which Gertrude and her hapless family betook themselves as a hiding-place. They had few neighbours in that quiet solitude, and no busy, curious fellow-countrymen to pry into their conduct, or into the causes of their banishment from England : for banishment it must have seemed to all who, witnessing the smallness of their new domicile, could contrast it and its scanty comforts with the appearance and manner of the women by whom that poor abode was tenanted.

Alice had written to the Rector immediately on their installation in their new home. He had requested her to correspond with him, and she had at once consented—glad, indeed, to have such a means of communication with Thornleigh and all its interests open to her ; but she had not expected a *very* prompt reply to her letter, from one who generally manifested so little *empressement* in her service, and still less was she prepared to find that her communication was answered by Herbert, not by writing but in person. She was alone in the house (for Gertrude had taken out the little ones for their morning exercise), when a step upon the brick floor of the small entrance-hall (a masculine step, and therefore an unwonted one) induced her to open the door of the room in which she sat, and to ascertain who was the intruder. And to her delight she saw that it *was* Francis ; it was their friend—it was the good and religious Rector, who, with “English Clergyman” written so unmistakeably on the spotless white of his muslin cravat, and on every seam of his severely clerical garments, had come among those half-savage Papists to succour and support his former friends ! There was a rush of joy to the girl’s heart, and a cry of welcome burst from her lips as he took her in his arms.

“Thank God !” she exclaimed ; and then, “Oh, Francis, we have been so very miserable !”

Herbert kissed away the tears from the fair face that lay on his shoulder, for his heart was touched ; and, rigid disciplinarian

as he was, he could not but be struck by the barrenness and discomfort of that poor abode as compared with the luxurious surroundings of the home that had once been hers.

“How wretched!” he murmured; “what a place for you to live in!”

“Ah! do not think of that,” she said, in answer to his pitying remark. “You know I never was a slave to creature comforts; and I have so much to do, and active employment is always good for us! You will say—I am sure you will, dear Francis—that I am the very usefulest of useful little women; and you have so often, in happier times, told me that I must be busy—have you not?”

Words were not needed for an answer, as he kissed her again, more fondly even than before.

“But it is of poor Gertrude I think so much,” continued Alice; but here the Rector drew away a little, as though the topic she has chosen were less pleasant to him than had been the preceding one. “Of poor Gertrude, who really does nothing but grieve and weep. For hours she sits silently brooding over her disgrace and misery, and she is wasted to a very shadow! You will pity her—I am sure you will—when you see her poor changed face.” And the girl’s tears broke out afresh.

“I should certainly feel for her the compassion which all must, I trust, entertain for a woman who is expiating her offences in sackcloth and ashes. Lady Thornleigh is at this moment passing over the Bridge of Sighs that leads over a gulf of sin and misery to a heavenly resting-place. At least,” he added—feeling that he had perhaps been too sanguine in his anticipations regarding poor Gertrude’s future—“at least, we have reason to hope so. But I must urge upon you, dear Alice, that it is only by long and sincere repentance, and by the living for a lengthened period of a blameless life—it is only after bitter humiliation and much tribulation, that such sinners can hope for peace. But your sister has not even acknowledged her sin; your sister has not humbled herself, either before men or before God. It may be (and gladly would I hail such a proof of returning virtue)—it may be that to me, as her appointed minister, she will make confession of her errors. To me alone could she confide her secret; for she would not surely venture to pollute your maiden purity with any mention of her sin!”

“But what would you that my sister should confess to you—

the secrets of another?—the secret she has sworn to guard? For I believe my sister, Mr. Herbert—I believe that she is innocent; and that she is so I will, with my feeble voice, proclaim.”

There were no tears now but, instead, a look of calm and quiet determination, that should have enlightened her auditor as to the character with which he had to deal.

“Feeble, indeed,” he repeated, waving his hand impatiently. “For you would but make shipwreck of your own faith, should you remain with this unhappy woman; and in your endeavour to save her, you would be drawn into the vortex from which you had vainly hoped to rescue her! Alice, dearest, listen to me,” he continued, in a gentler tone. “I have come a long and weary way to find you, in the hope, the earnest anxious hope, that you will return with me—return as my wife, to bless the home which I shall endeavour to make happy for you.”

“I have told you, and I repeat it now, that while Gertrude is in sorrow I will cling to her, and that where she is there will I be also.”

“But your sister will not be alone.”

“Alone!” echoed Alice, with a bitter laugh, as she glanced round the bare white walls. “Alone and broken-hearted! Truly yours is a comfortable creed, if to leave her thus you deem would be a duty.”

The tone of her voice affronted Herbert, who, though he would not have owned the hard impeachment, was growing angry. He had undertaken a tedious journey, and generously overlooking Alice’s fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, now brought to light, had been willing to accept of her as his wife. He had expected, therefore, to meet with gratitude for the sacrifice he told himself he was making, and was disappointed.

“Since such is your resolution,” he said coldly, “there is, I imagine, nothing to be gained by a lengthened discussion of the subject; and it would be, perhaps, as well that I should bid you farewell.”

Alice could not hear those words unmoved. In a moment her anger was softened by the memory of his many excellent qualities—of the old affection she had felt for him, and of his kindness in coming so far to seek them; besides, they were so very desolate, so utterly friendless; and therefore, with faltering accents, she said:—

“ You must not leave us in anger, Francis ; Gertrude will be so hurt and mortified. I wish she were at home ; you could not be hard upon her then. Only wait.”

He saw his advantage, and pursued it rashly and fatally.

“ Alice,” he said (while he stood before her as if in judgment), “ I have loved you dearly—so dearly, that you have often seemed a stumbling-block in my path of duty. I have striven so against my love, that the striving has become a habit with me ; and I have now wrestled with the angry feeling which many a better man might feel at seeing an erring sister preferred before his unchanged affection, and I am able to propose an alternative.”

“ Let me hear it,” said Alice, seeing that he hesitated.

“ The alternative of sharing your sister’s home, and, alas ! her deep disgrace, or of *never* sharing that of the man whose love you have trifled with. *My* wife and the mother of my children must not be pointed at as——”

“ Enough !” interrupted Alice proudly, pale with anger, for now she marvelled that she had ever loved him. “ If this be *your* charity, it is indeed time that we should part. Mine teaches me not only to hope, but to believe all things ; and by the blessing of God, may we be enabled also to endure all things. Farewell ! In this life it is not likely that we shall meet again ; but in your dealings with your fellow-men, and in the judgment of your God, may you never need the mercy that you have denied to us !”

Herbert was not one to sue for a reconciliation, and so the tie between them was broken ; but when the Rector returned to his duties at Thornleigh, he felt the severing of that tie more severely than he cared to own ; and his asceticism, strengthened by self-reproach (although he knew it not), grew from that hour sterner even than of yore.

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## CHAPTER XII.

“La dissimulation la plus innocente n'est jamais sans inconvenient : criminel ou non, l'artifice est toujours dangereux, et presqu'inévitablement nuisible ; la meilleure et la plus sûre politique est de ne jamais employer la ruse, les détours ou les petites finesses, et d'être dans toutes les circonstances de la vie également droit et sincère.”

LA BRUYÈRE.

AND here, in this still retrospective history, we must turn aside a little and revert to Helen, whom we left on the roadside of Life's Highway, wounded and helpless. At first it was the chill alone she felt—the sharp cold of the stab, as the weapon entered into her side ; but then came the heavy fall as she sank beneath the blow, and for a while all was dark. But she recovered, as many a one has done before, and will again as long as there are men to deal such blows, and women to sink under their infliction. Then she arose, but stunned almost and stupefied, and staggering to her feet, pursued her way painfully and alone.

Her first resting-place was far removed from the scene of her short-lived happiness ; for it was to a small seaport town in a northern county that she betook herself, with her crushed fortunes and ruined hopes, for shelter and for privacy. Very humble was the abode she fixed upon—a small lodging over a little-frequented shop ; but in it she found the quiet and the obscurity that she sought for. But Helen, strong-nerved and vigorous both in mind and body, felt (and that before many weeks had passed over her head) that her spirit and her courage were becoming exhausted in that self-imposed seclusion.

She could not bear it. It was not that she regretted the already half-forgotten enjoyments of days gone by, nor that she pined for the presence of one on whom to lavish the passionate love of which Thornleigh had shown himself so wearied ; it was simply that she needed employment, society, companionship—the invigorating avocations, in short, which to

a young and healthy temperament are as the very oxygen of existence. But these things were beyond her reach ; and therefore, even as a fire dies out for want of a draught to call forth and stimulate its vitality, so did she droop and fade in the stagnant atmosphere that she was breathing.

One long summer passed away for her in that dreamy, droning existence ; and in after-years how often and how wonderfully did she recall the months that she had so spent and wasted ! It was, in truth, a dreary time. The hot sun, staring into the close, unhome-like room, brought no cheerfulness along with it, but only seemed to mock her with the memory of brighter days ; and then the dirty faded carpet, the unsightly chimney ornaments, the washed-out, scanty curtains ! How each and all of these took their tiny part in the phantas-magoria to which in her after-life she looked back !

She had a little attic bedroom, in which, when the long day was over, she would seek for rest and sleep, but often in vain ; for, baked by the July sun which glowed upon the roof, the atmosphere of that heated chamber was almost too oppressive for endurance. The bed on which she threw herself was as hard as though stuffed with marble from the shop below ; for her landlord was a stonemason (a sculptor he called himself), and many a doleful record of passed-away mortality might be read by the townspeople through the windows of the basement story ; while the monotonous click of the chisel (like the note of the death-watch) resounded in the neighbourhood of the shop and throughout the house.

But though Helen's lodging was small and comfortless, and her fare far from generous, she never for a moment regretted her refusal to accept from Philip an increase to the small income that she could call her own, and which was derived from the legacy left her by her father. It was a bare two thousand pounds—that portion from the savings of a life of toil ; and when the tax-gatherer had had his share and the duty had been paid on it, the income produced was but a *modicum* indeed !

One day in the early autumn it chanced that, as the solitary woman was taking her accustomed walk upon the sands, she saw a face that she fancied was not altogether unknown to her—it belonged to a man whose dress bespoke him to be a clergy-man. He was approaching towards middle age, and on his arm leant a lady of large dimensions, ill-dressed and angular. Once

and again she met them, and the last time—the gentleman looking fixedly at the remarkably handsome woman whom he had recognized at a glance—her doubts were solved, and she knew him to be her old acquaintance, Mr. Fanshawe, the military chaplain of the — station. The change in his appearance was, no doubt, caused by his smoothly-shorn face (for in India he had worn a beard), and by the increased sedateness and decorous bearing of his dress and walk. He passed, but made no sign; and it being evident to Helen that he had not mentioned his recognition to the lady who accompanied him, she decided, and very justly, that the said lady was no other than his wife.

The next day, and not greatly to her surprise, the recluse received a visit from the gentleman who had known her under circumstances so different. Was it curiosity that had led him to seek her, or was it admiration of her beauty? These were questions which his hostess might have found it hard to answer, there being something in her manner which defied the one, while it effectually repelled the expression of the latter.

The visit was a long one, and many indifferent subjects were discussed during its continuance. Helen was, as may be supposed, silent as to the past; but she was very candid in her admissions as to the almost insufferable tedium of her present life. She wanted employment, she said, and occupation of almost any kind would be a godsend to her. She would be nurse, housekeeper, teacher—anything to drive away the demon of *ennui* that had taken possession of her.

“Pon my word,” said the *ci-devant* army-chaplain, after hearing her complaints, “I believe I know of the very thing for you—that is, if you don’t mind being bored.”

“Bored! nonsense,” said Helen, with something of her old impetuosity. “No one is bored who has anything to do.”

“Are they not? Well, you can but try; however, it is only a very small affair, and you mightn’t like to be a village school-mistress.”

She did not make him an immediate answer, but instead, rapidly passed in review the motives of the man, and the absolute certainty that for his own sake her secret would be kept inviolate. She would not shame her woman’s pride by asking for that secrecy, nor would she imply that her antecedents unfitted her for the vocation that he had proposed to her. She knew, no one better, how far she had been guilty; but she, of

all the world, could likewise best judge how sincere were her regrets for the past, and how firm was now her resolve to do her duty in every walk in life in which it should please God to place her.

Seeing her hesitate, the visitor again addressed her. “I was sure you would not like it ; the confinement and the trouble of the children would, I am convinced, never suit you.”

“Indeed they would. I am certain that I should even enjoy it of all things ; and then,” she added laughingly, “wages, you know, not so much an object as a comfortable home.”

“Yes ; but there are wages though—a salary I mean,—thirty pounds a year, coal, candles——”

“Ah ! I know—all the Bumble catalogue,” said Helen, still laughing ; for she was a very girl in some things still, and it was so long since she had even smiled !

There are some men who seem to consider a woman’s merry laugh as in some sort a challenge, and who are even wont to fancy that having so laughed, her arms are thrown away, and that she has ceased to be her own protectress. Of such men of obtuse perception was Mr. Fanshawe, the parson of Indian habits and of crowded soldier-stations ; for taking up his hat, as though preparing to depart, he looked at her in a fashion that called the blood up to her peerless brow. From her white teeth and rosy-parted lips and back to the dark lustrous eyes he glanced ; and then, so much of the offending Adam as Mrs. Fanshawe had not as yet whipped out of him went near to angering the handsome Helen beyond all hope of future pardon. He stopped, however, in time : for either “by the pricking of the thumbs,” which tells when something wicked “this way comes,” or by some other mode of divination which cunning women know of, Helen foresaw what words were coming, and in a moment was armed with a panoply of dignity that might have befitted the most respectable among the ladies of the land.

“I shall be charmed to make the trial you propose,” she said, with a tone and manner as though she had been accepting an invitation to dinner, penned by the fingers of the virtuous Mrs. Fanshawe herself. “I am persuaded that I shall like the life immensely. Tell me when I can begin, for it is terribly tiresome here, and I am longing for change of any kind.”

The affair was soon arranged, the only difficulty lying with

the parson, who could not work up his courage to the act of suggesting to Helen that it would be advisable to change the name by which she had been formerly known for one that would be less likely to betray her antecedents. This, and the desire he was anxious to manifest, that their own previous acquaintance should remain a profound secret, kept him, from the difficulty he experienced in making known his wishes, in a state of most embarrassed silence.

Again Helen came to his relief.

“There is a Mrs. Fanshawe, of course?” she asked.

“Now, why does she say ‘of course?’” was Fanshawe’s inward question; but he contented himself with answering in the affirmative.

“I was sure of it; where is she to-day?”

“Gone to Scarborough, and will remain there till to-morrow.”

“I was certain of that, too. But tell me, does she allow you to make appointments?” and she smiled at her own involuntary *double entendre*.

The joke was lost upon Fanshawe.

“Well, yes,” he replied; “but the fact is, it will lie between me and the Archdeacon.”

“I am afraid it must *lie* somewhere else, too,” said Helen, still laughing, for the man’s dulness amused her; “for I suppose that it would not do to reveal all the truth to your wife. But, however, I shall leave all that to you. To-morrow I will go to York, and to that place, if you do not change your mind, you can write me a letter in a businesslike way. But stay—I must not forget to tell you that I am called Mrs. Langton now; it is my own name, and one I intend to retain.”

After a little more discussion, all the preliminaries were in a fair way of being settled; but the visit was longer than was altogether agreeable to Helen, who felt a little afraid of the comments that the stonemason’s wife might make upon it. A very decent body was that worthy landlady—a little cold and hard, perhaps, like her own wares, and given, moreover, to a suspicion that the virtues of the dead, as recorded on the tombstones, are not always shared by the living. Her lodger was aware of this peculiarity, and rather shrank from arousing the spirit of her stern morality.

At last the Vicar seemed ready to depart.

“Remember,” said Helen, “that I consider myself engaged to you.”

“I wish to——”

But the warm words (if warm they were) were checked ere they were uttered ; for Helen’s hand was already on the bell-rope, she having chosen to forget that the time was past for her, when a “ring” for the departing guest was a necessary and habitual ceremony.

“Good-bye,” she said, as she held out her hand.

“Good-bye ; I am afraid you will find the country very dull.”

“On the contrary, I expect to be very happy ;” and so they parted.

And now it is more than probable that the Reader will exclaim against the “underhand” duplicity of the woman, who could lend herself to so base a deception for her own benefit (if not, indeed, for some worse purpose). It will be said too, perhaps, that such a proceeding is at variance with the character of one who has hitherto shown herself to be peculiarly frank and outspoken. In extenuation for a fault so grave, and in explanation of an inconsistency that seems so glaring, we can only urge that, by concealing her former errors, Helen Langton believed that she wronged and injured no one. She felt strongly within her both the power and the inclination to do good and be of service to her fellows, and was well aware that the knowledge of her previous history would be a bar and a hindrance to her in the performance of the duties she had marked out for herself. Under these circumstances, and impressed with that conviction, she resolved to abstain from a voluntary confession, which might have injured many, and benefited none.

Let those of her sex blame her who have themselves revealed all. Is there one who reads this book that can lay her hand upon her heart, and say that her friends—her husband—her world, in short—have been, by her own confession, made cognisant of her faults and her shortcomings ?

Does the mature young lady, whose temper has become soured by previous disappointments, reveal to the poor doomed lover (ere she leads him to the altar) that the tongue which utters only pleasant flatteries to him now, will hereafter be (as that of the “contentious wife”) like a continual dropping ? And did Mrs. Jones, may I ask, who flaunts herself in silks and velvets, not allow, in the days of courtship, that poor young lawyer to believe that her ambition soared not above

coloured calicoes and muslin? And as for you—and you—fair ladies, pray what have you not hidden from the men who listened at God’s altar to your vows, believing that your thoughts were pure, and that your hearts were worth the keeping? And in all such cases injury is, by concealment, done to others; but in Helen’s it was not so, and therefore she may perhaps be excused, even in the sight of those who, being themselves blameless, will be the least likely to visit her act severely.

The lapse of little more than a week found “Mrs. Langton” (for so she must now be called) established in her new home. And a very pleasant home it was—a small three-roomed cottage, with latticed windows, and a garden full of autumn flowers. The schoolmistress’s house was the toy of a great and fanciful lady, who played with it for a few weeks in the fall of the year. It was quite a model affair, with late-blooming roses trained over the walls, and was made to match the schoolhouse and the dairy—being built externally on the same principle. The small gardens belonging to each were similarly laid out, and were now all ablaze with red geraniums and many-tinted chrysanthemums.

It was a delightful surprise to the great lady to find so ornamental a teacher established in the cottage: “she was so well suited to the office”—“had such nice manners”—“no coarseness or vulgarity, and not the least forward;” and thus panegyrized, Mrs. Langton in her schoolroom, and surrounded by her liveried, curtseying pupils, became one of the “lions” that the “Castle visitors” were taken to see and to admire.

But for her previous experience, Helen might have run some risk of being “spoilt” by the notice and admiration she excited; for she was too complete a woman not to be something of a “coquette,” but she was also that rare thing, a “coquette with a heart;” and thus it followed that regrets for the past and, above all, the active, daily duties of the present, preserved her from a danger that might otherwise have been great.

Of the Vicar, except at church, she saw but little; for Mr. Fanshawe was a prudent man, and given to the avoidance of unnecessary risks. Helen was thankful that he possessed the virtue of discretion; and having ceased in any way to fear him, she could not but feel some compassion for her old acquaint-

ance, whose domestic grievances, as the husband of Mrs. Fanshawe, seemed to her (unworthy as she deemed him) to be even greater than his deserts.

But what was wrong in the mental structure of that lady it would have been hard to say; for whether her nature were hard or soft, proud or humble, generous or mean, it seemed alike next to impossible to decide. She was utterly inaccessible—there were no salient angles by which to scale the fortress; for all in and about her was as a high blank wall, whose unromising aspect defied a nearer approach.

Of a very different character and disposition was the gentle wife of the Archdeacon of D——. She was a West-Indian Creole, small in stature, and slightly deformed, but with a bright pretty face, that was ever beaming with real smiles, and with piercing black eyes that actually sparkled with merriment. She had children almost uncountable by all but herself, and was endowed with a fixed idea that it was impossible to have too many olive-branches round her table. In short, she was a woman intended by nature to be a mother—a whole mother, but not, as her numerous friends could testify, nothing but a mother. Next to her children she loved, as she was in duty bound to do, the excellent and amiable Archdeacon; deferring to his judgment in everything, and giving him all honour as the father of her children, and (but that was, perhaps, a secondary consideration) as a dignitary of the Church and an admirable Christian gentleman.

The warm-hearted little Creole was at once strongly prepossessed in Helen's favour; for she loved all pretty things and people, and especially admired the sunny, almost tropical style of beauty, and the rich, sweet voice of the Schoolmistress. The Vicar's wife was her *bête noir*. She had tried in vain to know her, and had striven hard to make good her entrance to the citadel, where she had a faint idea that something valuable might possibly be found. But her labour was in vain; and on the failure of each successive attempt she had felt how hard it was to be for ever rolling up the stone which was certain to fall back, a chilling weight upon her efforts and her labours.

The Archdeacon was more cautious than had been his wife in pronouncing an opinion on the new-comer; for, good man and charitable Christian as he was, he had not failed to perceive the something in her countenance which revealed to him that

*l'amour avait passé par là.* He was many years older than his wife, who was a mere child when she passed into his hands ; and he, dreading the world and the world's ways, had ever kept her as far removed as possible from the busy *humbug* of men, and from the chance of tasting certain fruits that grow on the tree of knowledge—fruits which women, even little women so pure of heart as was Esther Morton, are ever on tiptoe to reach.

But there were other causes, besides the one written on her beautiful face, that roused the suspicions of the Archdeacon as to the previous life of Mrs. Langton. The Vicar had never seemed able to render a satisfactory account of the circumstances attending his acquaintance with her. He had not only told what was evidently a lame story, but he had not come promptly to the assistance of that story when the offspring of his imagination had halted by the way. All these things puzzled the Archdeacon ; but he determined to watch Helen and her proceedings narrowly, and, unbiassed by any conjectures of his own, to decide the case upon its own merits.

The result was favourable to the object of his investigation, and convinced him that whatever might have been the shortcomings of her past life, they were now (to the best of her power) fully redeemed. It was not only that she did to the utmost the work for which she was remunerated (though that in itself is a duty not always faithfully discharged), nor was it that her private conduct was ever and always irreproachable ; but it was far more than this that caused the good Archdeacon to acknowledge to his wife, that Mrs. Langton was not unworthy of their esteem. In other scenes he had met her, and had learned to know her worth ; for in the home of the afflicted, and beside the bed of the dying, her kindly presence had seemed to bring a comfort and a brightness beyond price. From her little store, the Schoolmistress had also drawn succour for the needy ; for she had not now to learn that the pill of good advice is easier swallowed when gilded, and that the visitor who comes empty-handed is rarely welcome. With her there was neither ostentation nor feigned humility, for in all her acts she seemed to say, that she had done only that which it was her duty to do.

“Mother,” said Mrs. Morton’s little daughter Ruth to her one day, “why does Mrs. Langton never kiss me ? She kisses Davie often, and he’s a boy.”

“Perhaps, dear, she thinks you are too old to care for kisses. Davie is hardly more than a baby, you know.”

“But, mother,” said Ruth, returning to the subject after a pause given to reflection on the subject of the endearments bestowed upon the youthful Davie, “why do you never shake hands with Mrs. Langton? Isn’t she a lady?”

The question was a simple one, but still the mother found it hard to answer. She would not explain to the child that the contact with her hand had been—though unobtrusively, yet—so invariably shunned by Helen, that she had at last ceased to make any demonstration of a civility which she knew would not be accepted. At an early age of their acquaintance she had, on one occasion, found, on her entrance into the Schoolmistress’s little parlour, the Vicar’s wife already established there, and busy with parochial accounts of books, coals, and blankets. Willing to prove to Mrs. Fanshawe in how high an estimation she held their young hostess, the Archdeacon’s kindly wife held out her hand to her in greeting; but, as usual, it was not accepted—nay, more, it was refused with marked avoidance, and a deep and ceremonious courtesy was her only acknowledgment of the proffered token of cordiality and esteem.

This was strange, and the more so as Helen had ever appeared grateful for acts of kindness done, and for any warm feeling of friendship expressed towards her.

Meanwhile, and during the two years that had elapsed since she had been installed in her new office, Mrs. Langton had found that she was considered by the Vicar’s wife as under her especial authority and management. Guided and controlled by that active lady, she assisted in her self-imposed duties, dealing out petticoats and doling out bonnets, and being, in short, as much her curate or help, as was the melancholy-looking Mr. Doall to the sleek and comfortable Vicar.

But though Helen had no objection to the work, inasmuch as to be useful was her delight, yet she did think the Vicarress’s constant visits almost too great a tax upon her patience; and never did she feel more rebellious against the autocratical Mrs. Fanshawe than when those visits interfered with her free enjoyment of Mrs. Morton’s society.

It was a few days after the one on which little Ruth had asked her mother the question to which she could not satisfactorily reply, that the latter, leading her little Davie by the hand, made her appearance in Helen’s parlour. Filled with

flowers was that tiny chamber, and among them, seated at the open casement and busied with some homely work, was the fairest flower of them all—at least in the estimation of the happy child, who, flinging himself into her arms, covered her face with kisses.

“I am come,” said Mrs. Morton, as soon as the boy’s violent demonstrations of affection were sufficiently calmed down to allow the object of them to reply to questions asked—“I am come to make you promise to be of our haymaking party to-morrow. The children all declare that it will not be a real happy day without you. Ask her, Davie;” and Davie, once more throwing his little arms round her neck, whispered to “Nellie” that she must come.

“How I should enjoy it!” exclaimed Helen, as she returned his caresses: “but to-morrow is such a busy day!”

“Never mind the busy day. Take a holiday, it will do you good.”

“But what would Mrs. Fanshawe say to such an act of independence and insubordination?” remarked Helen, with a smile.

“Something too bad to repeat, I dare say,” said merry Esther Morton.

There was something ominous in the words, and Helen shuddered imperceptibly.

“That gloomy, dreadful woman!” continued her visitor. “If she would but enjoy existence a little herself, she might possibly allow you to do the same.”

“She does certainly contrive to make a shadow in a sunshiny place,” said Helen, with a half-sigh. “But, indeed, dear Mrs. Morton, I fear I must ask you to excuse me, for I cannot break through the rules she has laid down for me.”

“The children will think you very unkind,” cried the impetuous little woman. “But still I cannot believe you will continue to refuse me, when I ask for your compliance as a personal favour to myself.”

Helen was very sorry, but very firm. It went to her heart to disappoint and annoy, by her refusal, one who had shown her such marked kindness and consideration; but, from some unfathomable motive, her resolution remained unchangeable. The Archdeacon’s gentle wife was as angry as it was in her nature to be. She was vexed for her children and, perhaps, a little jealous of the encroachments of the Vicaress in the

government of the parish ; and thus, for at least a week, she nursed her wrath in her warm heart till it was very hot indeed. She had hoped and expected that the contumelious Schoolmistress would write her a note full of penitential excuses ; but when no such missive came, she removed the cover from the vessel of her wrath, and let it fairly boil over. The Archdeacon was greatly amused at the ebullition.

“And so,” he said, “you are indignant with Mrs. Langton, because, like a sensible woman, she declines being dragged into notoriety, and out of her own sphere of life. Take my advice, dear Esther, and leave your humble friend’s youth and beauty in the shade. I have no doubt that it would be very agreeable to *pronounce* her and them as discoveries of your own ; but it is evident that the fair Schoolmistress has no fancy for being handed about and commented on, as though she were a new fern, or any other vegetable curiosity. Really, I respect her for her discretion amazingly.”

Esther bowed (as a good wife should) to her husband’s judgment ; but had she guessed how much that judgment, usually so clear and penetrating, was at fault, and how entirely he had mistaken the real motives for Helen’s conduct, he would, perhaps, have sunk a little in her estimation.

Meanwhile the said Helen had taken herself seriously to task, and had asked herself, and that with a stern investigation from which it was impossible to shrink, whether she were justified in withholding the confession of her former errors from her present friends.

The answer was long in coming, for sophistry brought forth many a specious argument to prove that there was no sin in secrecy ; but at last (moved mostly by the thought of how thoroughly she was trusted) the honest frankness of her nature conquered, and she resolved to reveal the truth. The struggle had been hard (harder, perhaps, than those who have never been called upon to confess a sin can imagine) to bring herself to consider the art of self-accusation as a duty ; but Helen’s was not a common character ; she had her own code of honour —a code that was well-nigh as a religion to her ; and stern as were its laws, she resolved to obey them, though written in her heart’s blood might be her sentence of condemnation.

And thus it chanced that, not many days after the conversation with his wife that has just been related, the Archdeacon found himself one Sabbath-day listening to the penitent

woman's confession of her sin. He never once looked at her face while she poured it forth, but, shrouding his own countenance from observation, sat quite still and listened. And Helen told him all—her temptations—her fall—and her heavy punishment in the loss of him she had so dearly loved ; and when she came to the end, she said, very humbly and timidly (for she mistook his silence for utter and unqualified condemnation)—

“I have done my best—I have intended to do right—nor do I think that I have injured the children by what I have taught them. I have tried—indeed I have—to give them good principles. I have endeavoured to make them love work, and have told them—you do not know how often—that it is not by striving after the attainment of a station above their fathers, but by leading a useful, busy life, that they can hope to be happy. I have sought to make them understand and do their duty to their God, and to their neighbour, and have tried to make them love dress and fine clothes less. Indeed, indeed, I have not given them bad principles.”

And thus she ran on, in a disjointed and hurried fashion, while her eyes were riveted to the ground, and her breath came short and quick.

“I know it—I am sure of it,” said her greatly interested auditor. “But I must own I am greatly shocked to learn all this. Pray tell me, was Mr. Fanshawe cognizant of the events of your early life? Is he aware of this—this deception, the revelation of which has so completely taken me by surprise? for, truly, I never could have surmised that you were other than you seemed.”

His cold questioning chilled Helen, as does the shock of the sprinkled water when it brings back a painful life to the fainting sufferer ; but, as was customary with her, sorrow found vent in bitter and self-accusing words.

“Of course you could not,” she said ; “for how could you have imagined that I was so vile a creature? Women are such wondrous cheats ; and of course, like all of us, I was born an actress.”

“Hush,” said the good man, “do not talk so wildly ; you blaspheme against your sex. You were intended for better things than for the life you tell me of.”

“And who intended me?” asked she, now fully roused. “Was it my father, to whom I was a plaything as a child, and

an encumbrance as I grew to womanhood ? Was it my mother, who never instilled into my mind one good or religious principle ? Oh ! you do not know how neglected I was. There were rigorous and watchful parents among our friends, who averred that I was spoilt ; and so I was, but not as they counted spoiling. I had my punishments for ill-doing ; and in what do you think they consisted ? A Psalm, a Bible-chapter, or a Collect, to be learnt by heart. And for rewards, why, a gaudy sash or an envied necklace were bestowed upon me ; and the gifts became indissolubly connected in my childish mind with all that was right and praiseworthy. Steady and judicious control I never knew. No good habits were fostered, and the foundation for self-government was never laid. Can you wonder that I grew up as in my childish days I was allowed to live, and that, idle, self-engrossed, and headstrong, I was ready to sink under every temptation that was set before me ?”

“Poor child !” murmured the Archdeacon, in a voice of compassion.

“Ay, poor indeed ; for even my faint aspirations after good were checked, and my few virtuous resolutions nipped in their early bud ! I had a tender conscience when I was a little girl ; and well do I remember that once, remorseful for an unconfessed offence, I lay down upon my bed with a heavy heart. In the night-time terrible ideas assailed me. I had heard of sudden deaths ; and on the day before, the awful words, ‘Died by the visitation of God’ (as if we ever died by anything else !) had been repeated for the first time within my hearing. I asked myself, ‘What if I too should die suddenly ? What if I, a wicked child, should on that night be also visited, and be, before the sun arose, a corpse ?’

“I lay in my small bed, trembling and affrighted. My sin had found me out ; and ‘Oh !’ I cried from the depths of my little penitent heart, ‘if I do but live till morning, I will tell it all, and never, never be wicked any more.’

“And when the morning came, I went to my mother’s room (she always lay there, pale and suffering, on the sofa, being weak and nervous, but ever gentle to us children), and there I poured forth all my childish sorrow—my guilt, my repentance, and my fear of the punishments of God. Yes, kneeling by her side, and crying very bitterly, I made my confession humbly, and with an entreaty to my parent that she would help, advise,

and comfort me. And when my tale was told, truly I was as the one who, asking for bread, was in its stead presented with a stone : for my mother, seeming very wearied (so wearied, indeed, that before she could reply she was forced to ask for some revivifying drops), made her languid commentary thus :

“ ‘ My dear Nellie, what is all this fuss about ? You are a very good little girl, and are a better nurse to me than any of the others. Bathe my forehead now, and don’t cry and talk any more ; it makes my head ache.’

“ It was the first and last time that I ever mentioned the subject of my conscience to any one. No, I was not intended to be good ; at any rate not by those whose intentions might have availed to make me so.”

The Archdeacon was silent ; for he was making mental comments on this sad little episode of her early life. But Helen, again mistaking the cause of his taciturnity, broke in impatiently :

“ Pray, speak to me ; pray, say at once if you intend to give me up entirely. I can bear misfortune, I can support a sudden shock, but suspense kills me.”

“ I must first know to what extent Mr. Fanshawe was acquainted with this history.”

“ He knew everything ; he was in India as chaplain to the garrison at ——.”

“ Humph ! Well, I can decide upon nothing yet ; I must go home and think the matter over.”

“ But will Mrs. Morton know of the confession I have made ? Will she be told that I am a worthless woman ? ” asked poor Helen, timidly.

The Archdeacon looked even graver than before ; and she, whose observation nothing escaped, saw the darkening cloud, and hastened to avert the danger.

“ Oh, sir,” she exclaimed, while her hands were clasped in entreaty, “ you do not know what your wife has been to me ! It was the constant sight of her goodness and purity that first fully awakened me to a sense of my own guilt. The tongues of preachers had failed to rouse me ; and the knowledge that the world would condemn me had vanished from my thoughts ; but her charity did not and could not fail ; and it was the light of hope that I might one day be more worthy of her friendship, that has led me to-day through the deep valley of humiliation. It is in your power to shut out that light from the future of

my life, but it will remain a bright star in my memory for ever.”

“I am glad to think she was so useful,” said the Archdeacon, the wings of whose imagination were too heavy to rise on the light winds that were sufficient for the support of Helen’s less ponderous pinions.

“And if you could but guess,” continued the grateful woman (who, now that the floodgates were opened, found it a welcome relief to pour forth her confidences in a torrent)—“if you could but imagine how lonely I have felt! how I have longed for some one to feel for me! Do not think me very wicked for having sometimes thought of *him*—of Philip—of my early love; and when I saw those darling little children, thoughts of a blessed home, and of a happiness which never could be mine, came over me, and almost broke my heart.”

“But you never spoke of those things to Mrs. Morton?”

“Never! How could you think it possible? How could you imagine concealment in one so true in all her dealings? How could you deem me capable of such an act? No; it is not from me that your pure wife shall learn what some men are, and what they make of women. But when you reveal to her how fallen is the creature she has honoured with her friendship, bid her remember that never has her hand been sullied by my touch, or the home of her children contaminated by my presence!”

The Archdeacon was now deeply moved. He contrasted the happiness of his own home with the desolation of that humbled fellow-being; and feeling how deep and how sincere was her contrition, he laid his hand upon her head, and pronounced her absolution.

“Poor girl! poor woman!” were his solemn words; “it is not for man to be more hard than the Almighty, who has said in His mercy that He would not ‘break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax.’ In His name, therefore, I say unto you that ‘your sins are forgiven, and that you may go in peace.’”

And Helen was not driven from the refuge to which, like a wounded bird blown o’er the deep, she had flown in search of rest. During three more (and they were not unhappy) years she remained a teacher; for the kindly support of the Archdeacon and his wife never failed her. That the latter knew her secret she was made well aware of by many a gentle

pressure of the hand, and by many a sympathizing word thrown in in season.

The past, however, of the penitent woman's life was as a sealed book between her and the true-hearted Creole ; but the latter noticed that her touch was no longer shrunk from, and that of all her many children, it was not on little Davie's cheeks alone that the grateful Helen pressed her warm and loving kisses.

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### CHAPTER XIII.

“Virtutem primam esse puto compescere linguam :  
Proximus ille Deo est qui scit ratione tacere.”—CATO.

IT may be remembered by those readers who have taken an interest in the details of Helen's early career that she had still a brother, a boy who was yet a small child when she left her father's house. On the occasion of the Doctor's decease, his remaining children met together, and then the one who had so long been a stranger to them was received by that young brother kindly and lovingly ; for he was hardly old enough to comprehend the full measure of the disgrace she had brought upon their house, and was moreover more drawn to the unreserved and warm-hearted sister, of whom he had seen and known so little, than to the matter-of-fact and undemonstrative wife of the now prosperous attorney.

Roger Langton had been (what is called) articled to a merchant in Liverpool, and, as some of his brother-clerks, with the taste for original wit characteristic of their class, were wont chaffingly to remark, “an uncommon nice article he was.” Unfortunately, the boy was able to obtain in the great commercial city some of that baneful thing called “credit ;” and being (like his unhappy sister) but ill-provided with a store of good principles wherewith to enable him to resist the assaults of temptation, he speedily found himself advancing towards that “Slough of Despond” called Debt. Some little time elapsed ere he was engulfed in the abyss ; and just over his shoes and shivering in the mud of that dirty slime was the thoughtless boy, when looking round him for relief and suc-

cour, he penned his first request for money to his sister Helen. It was but the loan of a few pounds, but he blushed as he scribbled down the words ; and after he had dispatched his letter, well-nigh wished that it had not gone.

In due time the answer with its flimsy enclosure arrived ; and in his delight at receiving it, Roger forgot his scruples and his regrets. On the next occasion, when creditors pressed him for the payment of their “small accounts,” he was more bold, for he was up to his knees in mire then, and could not afford to waste time in hesitation. The appeal that he made for assistance was an urgent one ; the letter, too, was full of regrets and promises of amendment ; but the amount of the sum required startled his sister.

She had no fears as regarded the providing for her own future necessities, nor was money in itself a thing of value to her : for that root of evil (which is said to be the deepest-growing and most noxious of all) had no place in the soil where so many dangerous weeds as well as precious flowers had grown and flourished. But she did shudder at the perils that lay so thickly in her young brother’s path, knowing (for she had bought her experience wholesale) how strong is the force of habit, and how vain is the attempt to restrain the headlong pace, when once the wild passions of youth have broken from the restraining curb. She trembled, too, for the results that follow from the lowering effect on the character of a long-borne burthen of debt. The mark which the galling chain has made, remains. It is not, perhaps, pleasant (at least in the early stages of a young lad’s career of dissipation, and before his conscience has become seared, and his feelings of honest independence blighted) to live upon the money of others, to wear their clothes, and to adorn himself with the trinkets of those by whom the vain and silly boy has been so foolishly trusted. But the sensation (annoying at first) soon wears off, and a debt of dishonour gradually ceases to be a burthen on his conscience.

Helen, thinking on these things, could only give her money, and grieve over her inability to do more. She could only stand on the shore, and watch with anxious eyes the little barque (with its freight of one precious soul) trembling as it rose and fell, tossed on the wild waves of life’s tempestuous sea. She was painfully impressed with the conviction that, by her own misconduct, she had forfeited her elder sister’s right

to offer counsel ; and therefore she seldom ventured to remonstrate with the selfish and unthinking lad who was now beginning to prey ruthlessly on her slender means. For Roger was over head and ears in the slough now : he had grown reckless and unscrupulous, and would have taken anything from anybody, except advice.

It will readily be believed that when she had been for some four years a schoolmistress, there remained to Helen (by reason of this constant demand on her small resources) but very little of the money bequeathed to her by her father. By far the greater portion of that bequest had passed into Roger's hands, and from his—ah ! that regretful sister could too readily imagine the manner of company in which so much of her little property had been squandered ! But she bethought her of her own shortcomings, and came to consider her loss as of the nature of a justly merited retribution.

It was now winter, a season always rather trying to her spirits, for, enliven them as she would by constant occupation, the long dark nights and evenings seemed sometimes interminable. Often, as the day was closing in, would she remain abroad in the hope of shortening those weary hours ; and long after dusk, an erect tall figure was often seen in the neighbourhood of the school, stepping quickly, with elastic tread, and clad in a thick grey mantle and concealing veil. This was Helen Langton, to whom it had become a habit to walk with some of the younger children to their homes ; and then (after giving them over to their parents' keeping) to return to her cottage alone. How thoroughly she enjoyed those walks ! the little children trotting gaily by her side, and either begging for more “ stories,” or listening delightedly to her easily-comprehended talk and cheery voice ; and then the brisk walk home-wards, with the countless stars twinkling at her through the clear frosty air, and the warm blood tingling through her veins by reason of the healthy exercise. There was always a bright fire awaiting her return, and the tea prepared by her clean and willing little handmaiden, while the kettle sung its evening song to her on the hearth. But, in spite of this look of home comfort, Helen was not happy then. She never felt so lonely as in those long December evenings, when in that little parlour the armchair opposite to her was empty, and her only companion was the little hairy terrier, who guarded her with the humble yet devoted affection peculiar to his species.

That solitary woman might not have put her cravings into words ; but surely it was in her heart to long for a strong arm on which to lean, and for a kindly breast on which to lay her head when she was weary. Surely it was not strange that dreams in which the lisp of children bore a part should visit her in her loneliness, causing her to hate the weary stillness of the room above, where there was no infant to need a mother's care, no “waxen touch” to press against her childless bosom.

In the course of that last wearisome December there came a female visitor to the Vicarage, and, as is usual in such cases and in distant country villages, there was talk and gossip concerning the new arrival. By some of the old folks she was described as an “old young lady, talking like and pleasant.” Her name was rather an uncommon one ; and Helen, when she heard it, had a vague idea that it had met her ears before, but when? was a question that her memory refused to answer. There was something pleasant (as the gossips said) in Miss Teasdale’s manner ; and when, with the Vicaress, she paid a visit to the school, the mistress was gratified by her courtesy, and pleased with the intelligence of her remarks.

Miss Teasdale, who was an old maid of what may be called negative qualities, and generally harmless enough, was however the correspondent of one, the evils of whose character were positive, and who was in herself anything but innocuous. From this correspondent (and she was no other than the Anna Talmash mentioned in an early chapter of our story) Miss Teasdale, about a week after her arrival at the Vicarage, received a letter, of which the following sentence formed a part :—

“Tell me by return of post the Christian name of the schoolmistress whom you describe as so beautiful. It is of great importance that I should receive this information without delay.”

It is not necessary to follow the correspondence through its course, but it is sufficient to say that, by the working of three of the most dangerous passions of women, viz., love of writing, love of talking scandal, and love of listening to the same, the victim of those passions found herself once more adrift, to endure the buffettings of the world, and possibly to sink again under its temptations.

And what was the motive that induced those conspiring women to inflict the deadly wound? Could they have been

influenced by malignant cruelty and by the wanton love of giving pain? God forbid! We believe that were one-half of the misery caused by idle and carelessly-spoken words known, or even guessed at, such words would often remain unsaid, and that the “poison of asps,” which lies under every human tongue, would cease its dangerous flow.

There are crimes (even those that are usually accounted the most heinous of the decalogue), for the commission of which excuses may be found in the strength of overpowering passions, or in the stern necessities of our common nature. But for this offence—for the *intentional* blasting of a reputation, for the stealing away of the hope for the future, for the moral murder of a feeble woman fighting her way to good repute—there is *no* excuse, nay, not even the shadow of palliation. Let us therefore hope that the crime is rare; and when we hear of women divulging the errors of their fellow-women—errors that, but for them, might have remained buried in the darkness of oblivion—let us deal mercifully with them. Vanity, a natural loquacity, and a love of repeating what is not generally known: these, and more than these, namely, the shallowness of the vessel that holds the brimming poison, may be among the causes of the mischief that is done. To these causes, then, let us attribute it, and not (in God’s name) to a poisoning instinct, more odious than that of a Brinvilliers or a Borgia!

The story of Helen’s fall lost nothing, either in the writing or the telling of it; for it is an easy thing to throw in an extra charge or two, and run them down hard with comments, and with expletives. And then came the agreeable necessity of making the shocking facts known to the Vicar’s wife; and Miss Teasdale was so distressed—“really it was a most annoying, unladylike task that had been imposed upon her—but she felt it her duty,” &c., &c.

The Vicaress listened with dilated eyes and head erect, and judging, from the sparkle of the former, that she was experiencing an agreeable sensation, the narrator proceeded with her facts, and having exhausted them, drew somewhat on her imagination. Meanwhile, indignant as she felt, there was something in the excitement of the situation that was not altogether unpleasing to the Vicar’s wife. Where is the woman who, in her heart of hearts, does not dearly love a scene?—a scene, especially, where the part she plays is a first

and a telling one? At once there appeared to the mind of the aggrieved lady confirmation, strong as proof of holy writ, of the vile conspiracy against her peace, carried on by the scheming Schoolmistress and her own lawful but law-breaking husband. We will not, however, follow her through the phases of her righteous wrath, nor describe the sufferings of the Vicar while writhing under the searching probe of her investigations, and the merciless incisions of her reproaches. A man may, in such cases, be left to fight his own battles, even though his antagonist be a woman; and therefore we desert the arena of the combat, to follow the fortunes of its ill-fated cause, who, almost within earshot of the tumult, resolved not to await its issue, but to go at once, not standing on the order for her going. She was not taken by surprise; for having always felt the insecurity of the refuge she had chosen, she had ever held herself in readiness to “up anchor” and steer her course to other and safer harbours.

But where was such a place of safety to be found? The Archdeacon was very kind, and took her to his own house; many blamed him for the deed, and there were not a few who pitied his wife when they heard that so dangerous an inmate had been admitted into the sanctuary of her home. But Esther Morton had no fears; for her own heart and her husband’s conscience were her guides, and the *Tables* (not indeed *of stone*) on which her law was written. She shed many tears over Helen’s downfall—that poor Helen who for years had been so good, and whom the children loved so dearly. Gladly would she have retained her winning guest as a permanent inmate, but the Archdeacon was far from counselling such an arrangement; nor would Helen herself have been willing to remain in the scene of her humiliation. So they found her a home in Eastern England, where her name and history were unguessed at, even by the friend to whom they consigned her. An almost bedridden invalid was that aged lady. Her fingers were distorted by rheumatic gout, and her eyes (worn by age and chronic weakness) were almost useless to her; but she was kind and charitable, and was, moreover, a rich and powerful single lady, having tenants who owned her sway; and from her bed she could wield her little sceptre, bidding her subjects “do this,” and (even against the dictates of their consciences) they did do it.

Her nephew, a middle-aged book-loving bachelor, short-

sighted in every sense of the word, lived under her roof; and for all the exigencies of society and companionship, they two (before the advent of Helen) had thought each other equal.

Old, wealthy Miss Lennard was the Archdeacon's godmother, and had, since he had grown to man's estate, held him and his sacred office in high esteem and affection. When, therefore, it was deemed expedient that a companion should be found, who for the helpless lady should have both eyes and tongue and understanding, the latter dictated a letter to her godson, asking for his advice and assistance. A portion of the reply, in which the latter recommended Mrs. Langton to her notice, ran as follows:—

“I have known her for four years, and believe her temper to be perfect, and her disposition and principles excellent. She has known much both of sorrow and temptation, nor do I aver that her life has been altogether blameless; but during the years that I have known her, she has never failed in one duty, but has been an example for good to all around her.”

Helen was very urgent with the Archdeacon to reveal the whole of her story to Miss Lennard.

“I cannot endure,” she said, “to be a second time an impostor. Is it right to give what may be called a false character? I have heard you say how dishonourable is such a deed in the case of a servant; why is it not equally so in mine?”

“Because,” replied the Archdeacon, “I consider that there comes a time (after deep repentance and expiation) when a fault may be pardoned, and its punishment may cease. And does that punishment cease if we blazon to the world that woman's error, on which, of all others, society has the least mercy? Were I to be asked the character of a man who, for confirmed habits of drunkenness, idleness, or theft, had been discharged from my service, I should certainly deem it a grave act of dishonour were I to conceal his faults from the person who made the inquiry concerning him. But had a man of whom I was called upon to give an opinion failed once, and that years before, and had his after-conduct proved that his repentance was sincere, then I should not feel justified in depriving him of the means of earning an honest livelihood which Providence had placed within his reach. No—certainly I should not betray him.”

Helen was but half convinced by these arguments. “I wish,” she said, “that Miss Lennard could be made aware of

all that you know against me. I should be much happier—much more satisfied that I was doing right.”

“Make the old lady your friend,” said the Archdeacon, cheeringly ; “let her judge for herself—let her (as Esther says) learn to love you ; and then, all things seeming fitting, you can make her your *confidante*. If I mistake not, my old friend (little as she knows of the world and its ways, and exempt as she has been from the trials and temptations of life) will say with me that the time for pardon has arrived, and that while she pities your sorrows she will, by kindness and affection, help you to forget the past.”

“God grant it !” ejaculated Helen, with a deep sigh : for as the time drew near when she was to say “farewell” to the kind friends who had sheltered her under their roof, and to the children whose young affection had twined itself round her heartstrings, her courage seemed to ebb, and a feeling of despondency stole over her usually elastic spirit. “God grant it ! But even in the event of harm arriving from this concealment, it is not to you—to you who have been so far kinder to me than I deserve, that I will turn in my desolation ; no—to my own heart only will I whisper that I was wrong—wrong under any circumstances, and under any guidance, to cross a threshold with a falsehood in my right hand !”

“On my head be it !” was the Archdeacon’s reply ; while his wife, as she bade adieu to her departing friend, reminded her (with tears in her soft eyes) that there would ever be a home for her in the house she was leaving, and in the hearts of all within it.

The little children clung round her with tearful eyes ; and when the last embrace had been given, and Helen looked back at the kind friends who were grouped at the door to witness her departure, she deeply mourned the necessity that compelled her to seek another home among those who knew her not. If only she had possessed a better brother!—one at least who would have allowed her the privilege of retaining her own humble fortune—she had not needed to trust herself to the small mercies of a merciless world. But regrets for the past were vain, and only served to increase her uneasiness for the future ; so with a vigorous touch she swept them from her mind, while she pursued her lonely way to the next halting-place on her life’s journey.

The traveller was received kindly at “Darrow House,” which

was the name of a frightful old pile of buildings on the chilly eastern coast. It was a place that by no possibility could be considered interesting to any but its owners ; and Helen shuddered when she first caught sight of the tall, dark pine-trees, swayed to and fro by the strong winds that did battle against that inhospitable shore. Their bowed heads and tossing arms gave a wild welcome to the stranger, who, but that her nerves were young and braced, would have shrunk from the ominous greeting in dismay. The interior of the house pleased her better ; and the old lady, in her helplessness and decrepitude, became an object of interest to her at once.

A married niece, whose husband possessed a considerable property on the outskirts of Miss Lennard's large estate, was often a visitor at Darrow House. She, too, was a great lady in her way. Her very dress—rich and rustling—bespoke her wealth and might ; and in her manner there was a grand and impressive condescension. This lady, when called upon to pronounce on the fitness of Mrs. Langton for the office to which she had been appointed, and on her claims to the honour of admittance to the society of “Darrow House,” at once gave her opinion in that person's favour. And so Helen entered on her new duties with no dissentient voice raised against her ; for they had no jealous feelings (that family so self-engrossed and concentrated) of the claims or merits of their fellow-men or women. They lived in the centre of their own property, and among their own so-called “dependents ;” and, rarely coming in contact with those of more enlarged minds and extended experience, they had no opportunity of drawing contrasts between themselves and their (possibly) more gifted fellow-creatures. Not one of the lights that science and social sense have thrown upon the world ever gleamed through the darkness of their prejudices ; and the first sod had yet to be turned above the soil which was hardened by the prejudices of generations. Helen could not be said to have companions : for the intellects of the old lady (never remarkable for brightness) were rendered still more misty by age and infirmity ; and her nephew, too engrossed by his books (which he read mechanically, and from bodily indolence) to attend to what was passing round him, was only seen by the “Companion” at the silent hour of dinner.

And so, among that unsuggestive eastern tribe, the bitter winter months rolled on. The showers of April were of snow

and sleet, and even with the miscalled “merrie month of May” warmth came not. Still summer, with its roses and its sunshine, beamed at last; but ere that summer ended, the scene changed again for Helen.

She had not been discontented during those tedious months, though her life had been one of confinement, and of rather monotonous and uninteresting work; for the old lady had seemed to value her attentions, and she hoped that the feeling towards her entertained by the other members of the family was rather favourable than otherwise. And thus she went on her way, if not rejoicing, at least cheerfully and hopefully.

But through all that season the woman, although she knew it not, was walking on ground beneath which a mine was dug. The train was laid by the hand of what men call Fate, but the match that was to blow into the air the frail fabric of Hope built upon that hollowed-out foundation, was applied at last by a mortal female’s hand.

She was a great lady, that rich one in the rustling silks, but not too great to be above the listening to evil tongues; and the report of Mrs. Langton’s beauty having spread abroad, the truth of the poet’s axiom, that “Women, like princes, have few real friends,” became again painfully exemplified. In some way (it boots not how) Miss Lennard’s niece learned that Helen had been a castaway. There was no *esclandre*, no recrimination, and no questioning. The Lennards (one and all) were simply surprised that such an event could have occurred in a family so exalted; and the humbled companion was therefore merely told that she was to go—to go, as any other “female domestic” might have been ordered to depart, who had been found unworthy to inhabit a house so highly placed, and breathe an air so pure from vile alloy.

There was little to regret in the home that she was forced to leave, and but that she *was* forced to leave it, Helen Langton might have rejoiced in the prospect of a more congenial mode of existence. Even as it was, and though feeling that the tongues of men were again busy with her name, she did not despond for the future; nor was there heaviness at her heart as the cold grey walls of that wind-rocked mansion faded from her view.

## CHAPTER XIV

“ Il est difficile de décider si l’irrésolution rend l’homme plus malheureux que méprisable ; de même s’il y a toujours plus d’inconvénients à prendre un mauvais parti, qu’à n’en prendre aucun.”

LA BRUYÈRE.

In Midland England, and in what is called a watering-place—which name (being in this case interpreted) means a town wherein distasteful waters may be imbibed, and whence men go forth to enjoy field-sports by day, and return at evening-time to eat, to drink, and to be merry : in that gay watering-place, but hardly of it, there lived a lonely widower in a little street—and that widower’s name was Considine. He had resided in the town for many years, and was one of its oldest and “most respected” inhabitants. His wife, who was said to have been a Spaniard and possessed of great beauty, had died soon after the birth of a second son. Her only children were those two boys ; and they, after the death of their mother, were, for all their lives, totally separated and estranged from their father.

Mr. Considine was a man of very weak character, and of a temperament nervously sensitive. The death of his wife, to whom he was devotedly attached, and to whose stronger mind he had looked up as in some sort a protection to his feebler powers, was a blow from the effects of which he never thoroughly recovered. The legacy she had bequeathed to him, in the shape of two fine noisy boys, was one that he was totally incapable of appreciating ; for the sight of them reminded him of her who was gone, and the sound of them was as anything but music in his ears.

But what was to be done with them ? He had no relations on whom to shake off the annoyance and responsibility that sat so heavily on his own shoulders, and but one intimate adviser with whom to consult on the best means to be adopted in order to free himself from a duty which some fathers would have considered in the light of a privilege. But he had one

intimate friend, and that friend was a host in himself, for he was a Jesuit priest.

Mr. Considine was a Roman Catholic, and a rich one. He lived in solitude, and was weakened by sorrow. Will it then be wondered at that the Rev. Mr. Carden obtained a great and overwhelming influence over his mind?

Before a month had elapsed, the boys (their dead mother's darlings) were no longer seen in the country home where she had breathed her last; and their father, moved by a morbid dislike to scenes where he had known sorrow, became an inhabitant of towns.

For forty years and upwards had this somewhat singular individual lived in the gay watering-place where we now find him, and at the end of that period we introduce him to the notice of our readers.

He was a grave, biliary-looking old gentleman, very thin, and bent, and shaky. His hands trembled, and his weak knees bent beneath their burthen; and it appeared as though life were to him little better than a state of wearisome endurance. Every day he might be seen wending his way to the reading-rooms with solemn step and slow, as though urged to the performance of a painful duty; but when evening came,—evening, with its little dinner at some kind friend's house, and a rubber of harmless whist to wind up the day's amusements—then the little world of L—— knew of what stuff that rich old man was made. Magnanimously (roused by the spirit of the old port he loved) he risked his cherished sixpences; and quaint and dry were the remarks he made while seated with his wrinkle-browed contemporaries at the dearly-loved green table.

He was rich both in lands and money, but it was only the latter that he could bequeath to whom he pleased—the former being entailed upon his eldest son, provided always that the said son professed the Roman Catholic faith. No Protestant could inherit the broad acres that had for generations past been the property of the Catholic Considines of Considine; and in the event of no blood relation of “Mother Church” appearing to claim them, the lands of the old man went from the family to swell the possessions of an already richly-endowed monastic institution.

The boyhood of the two lads, whose infant mirth and troublesome requirements had told so heavily on the shattered nerves and spirits of their father, was spent in the South of

France, where they had relations on their mother's side, who were nothing loth to undertake the supervision of their education and the care of their bodily welfare.

As time wore on, the father found himself still less willing than at the first to fulfil his parental duties. He was a creature of small habits, and a very slave to routine. Any, even the smallest infraction of the rules of his daily life jarred upon his nerves, and told (at least so he fancied) on his health. A loud voice was hateful, and a hearty laugh an abomination to him. The uncle and aunt, who lived in the land where the boys were sent to grow in stature, if not in grace, were too much engrossed with their own plots and plans, and too deeply interested in keeping the young Considines in their neighbourhood, to dwell upon the possible advantages that might have accrued to the lads from a return to their father's guardianship. And in this way, and in a complete separation between the strangely ill-brought-up sons and their valetudinarian father, the boyhood and youth of the former passed away.

Letters came from time to time to L——, letters that told that the boys were well, and were being educated with a due regard to the virtue of economy; and then, later still—and when the parent had forgotten in his self-engrossment that the need for money increases with age, and that his sons at nineteen and twenty were no longer children—there came demands for money which made old Considine quiver like a reed shaken by the wind, and sent him forth to his well-loved reading-room, to forget his parental anxieties behind the newspaper that he delighted in. But money he would not give—at least not more than was sufficient for the support, maintenance, and education of a rich man's *children*. A bare two hundred pounds a year for each was all that he could be induced to part with; and on that income the younger son—a fine, frank-hearted, spirited young fellow—married. His wife was a pretty French girl from the Basque provinces, and her family was one of the very smallest of the *petite noblesse*. She was a good wife while she lived, but that was only long enough to make her husband the father of a boy named *Juan*—of whom more anon.

The widower of the poor little Juanita was for a while inconsolable; but he was young to grief as to everything else, and an opportunity offering for a roving expedition with some sporting acquaintances to the Rocky Mountains, he joined the band, hoping thus to forget his sorrows.

Considerable was his success among the buffaloes and other wild beasts in the Far West ; and he was returning to reap, in the recital of his adventures, the reward of his exertions, when fever seized him ; and having only the medical advice of the kindly squaws, and the use of the simple medicines within their reach, he succumbed to the enemy. A few murmured words, in a language they understood not, a sigh or two for the friends who had left him there to die, and a wild wish for his Juanita, and all was over. They buried him under a live oak by the river side, and, taking up their burthens, left him there alone.

It was long ere the news reached the old man in England, and when it came he was not greatly grieved. But the short seclusion required by decency irritated him, and he was observed to be more than usually fractious when he appeared again in the world. The little Juan was taken possession of by his Basque relations ; but his education as an Englishman was defrayed by his paternal grandfather, who continued to dole out for his benefit the same annual sum that had sufficed for the father's wants.

And thus the years of nearly half a century passed noiselessly and almost uneventfully away for the aged hypochondriac. The passion for money had increased upon him, for he was a miser now ; and the little world in which he lived knew it, and did not shun him. Had he been only “well off” and penurious, he would have been scouted as a “screw ;” but he was a millionaire, so he was caressed and respected. His son was no longer a young man, for he himself had arrived within a few of the fourscore years when the strength of man becomes a labour and a sorrow. He had not seen his son for near upon fifty years, and sometimes doubted whether he were alive ; for tales had reached him which had made him shudder, as much with self-reproach as with nervous trepidation ; and the suspense that he endured was daily telling upon a weakened mind and a cowardly nature.

In the very outskirts of the town of L—— was a small and low public-house ; and occasionally to that house there came, from foreign parts, a man whose aspect and whose habits told of continental sojourn, but whose speech was that of an Englishman. His stay was always short—a two days' visit at the most ; and he was invariably accompanied by a young lad who never spoke, and whose face was completely concealed

from observation. The man, whose name (as he gave it) was Peters, had but one acquaintance in the town, and that one was Mr. Considine.

Whenever the mysterious visitor and his still more mysterious companion made their appearance at the “Cock and Bottle,” it was well known to the landlord thereof, and to all his household, that a closed vehicle would be ordered without delay, and that the two (man and boy) would be at once driven to the narrow street where dwelt the miser millionaire. On those days the tremor in the old man’s hands was greatest, and his shaking knees almost refused their accustomed duty—doing it as though under protest and unwillingly. The visits of this mysterious individual were no secret to the gossips of L——, and many were the comments made thereon. Neither did the peculiar habits of the younger stranger escape their notice; for they well knew that *he* never entered the doors of that small house in the narrow street, but sat within the carriage with close-drawn blinds, awaiting the return of the man who brought him there.

It was after one of those curiosity-exciting events that the rich gentleman, supported by his thick, old-fashioned umbrella, was creeping onwards to the reading-room.

The day was hot, and no air stirred to refresh him. There was a glare upon the pavement, and on a sudden black specks, which bewildered and annoyed him, floated before his eyes. Some one was passing him (a tall, strong man), and at that moment a cloud (all the specks collected in a body) swam in front of him; and, seeing nothing else, he caught with the instinct of self-preservation at what was nearest to his grasp, and that something was the strong man’s arm.

Brandreth (for it chanced that it was he) supported the failing, tottering form into the nearest house, and there, by dint of restoratives judiciously administered, the old man soon recovered. But the “neighbour” who had helped him did not leave him there, nor for many a day after; for there was something that moved his compassion in the condition of that selfish and seemingly hard-natured being. He saw through the veil that morbid feelings, and nerves naturally weak, had wound round the heart that seemed so callous; and, seeing this, he pitied him, and spoke gently to him. Before many weeks had passed in an intercourse that had begun so accidentally, old Considine had grown to value the society of Arthur Brandreth as he had

never prized that of mortal man before. He spoke openly to him ; he told him of his aches and pains, his dismal past, and his fear-fraught present. Above all, he confided to him the history of his acquaintance with the mysterious Peters ; but this he did tremblingly, and in a hushed voice, as though the man could hear him.

“He is a villain, sir,” he said ; “I know the man is a worthless villain, but he is not an impostor. There is, I fear, much that is true in the reports he has from time to time repeated to me ; for I know my son’s handwriting, and in that writing there is terrible corroboration of Peters’s story. He has led a bad life, sir, that son of mine. He took to vice as readily as an infant to its mother’s milk, and has sown his wild oats broadcast.”

“Is this man your only informant ?” asked Brandreth. “Surely you would not have condemned your son on his evidence alone ?”

Mr. Considine shook his head mournfully. “I have every proof,” he answered, “that he was incorrigibly bad ; his tastes were low, and his companions, for the most part, as degraded as himself.”

“But he was young once,” said Brandreth. “Had he no one to warn him then ?—no one to supply his parents’ place ? Oh, sir,” he urged, carried away by his concern for the condemned being for whom his own father could find no excuse ; “oh, sir, remember the strength of temptation that assails the young, and pause ere you pass such a sentence on your own flesh and blood as (if he be alive) may drive him to despair !”

“If I may believe Peters, there are few crimes to which he has not already been what you call *driven*, ” replied the father, unmoved by this appeal. “He was, years ago, and without my consent, privately married to a young lady of family ; he has a son who is a beggar, and has himself escaped to Australia to avoid the consequences which would follow the discovery of a forgery of which he has been guilty.”

“Again I ask you, dear sir (but pardon me if my perseverance wearies you)—again I ask you if you have any proof of these things ?”

“His own letters convict him—his own letters to Peters, in which repeated mention is made of the serious danger hanging over him. In those letters, too, he speaks of the girl (Gertrude he calls her) whom he has deserted, and begs of Peters to

watch over her safety should he never return to England. To do him justice, he seems to love the girl well. Of *who* she is Peters professes to be ignorant. He says that Henry never disclosed her real name to him ; but can I believe the man, think you, in this ?”

“ Certainly not ; there is improbability of the most glaring kind on the face of such an assertion.”

“ The whole thing distracts and worries me to death,” continued the old man, after a lengthened pause. “ Peters’s demands for money are incessant, and he is always coming to me with some fresh story of a threat against Henry, which threat he avers will be followed by a discovery of the forgery, if the utterer of the menace be not silenced by gold.”

“ And you have actually paid him money ! actually (on his own showing) believed that your son’s character and safety were in his hands ?”

“ Of course I have,” said the old man, fractiously ; “ I could run no risks. I could not have my name dragged through the mire by a reprobate who has disgraced me. And I had no friend ; no one that I could trust was near me ; and the man made me nervous. I was glad to get rid of him at any price.”

“ But now that you have a friend,” said Arthur, “ now that you have confided your annoyances to one who is most willing to be of any service in his power, surely you will no longer listen to the demands of this unscrupulous adventurer? Surely you will allow me to endeavour to clear up this painful mystery, and restore your son to——”

“ I believe he is dead,” said the old man, in an awe-stricken whisper.

“ Good God ! And what is your reason for that belief ?”

“ I dreamt it—not once, or twice, but several times. I dreamt that he came from the world of spirits and told me that his mother hated me in heaven, because I had not loved her sons on earth. But what could I do ? I just ask you what I *could* do, with my health and nerves, and all the bother I had to go through ?”

“ And what is this man’s last account of him ?” asked Arthur, evading the question put to him.

“ He thinks he is in Australia, and I have provided Peters with the means of searching for him there. It is too hard upon me, in my old age, to be pestered in this way. I don’t recover the visits of that detestable fellow for a month. And to-day,

just look at me ; I only ask you to look at me. Why, my tongue is like a nutmeg-grater (I give you my honour it is), and my hand shakes so that this morning I could not hold my tooth-brush.”

The latter portion of the old man’s symptoms Brandreth (who did look at him) could well believe. He was not a nice-looking ancient gentleman, was Considine of Considine, with his unkempt grey hair, greasy coat-collar, and neglected finger-nails. But he was (in spite of his riches) alone in the world,—alone, as every selfish being lives—alone, as every selfish man must die. And so Arthur Brandreth stayed by him and felt for him.

Meanwhile Peters, with his strange companion, had sailed for the Antipodes. They were gone, and the coward miser breathed again. Then Arthur left him, for other duties called him to the Continent ; and Considine, at ease, with his newspaper and his playing-cards, had ceased to interest him. We will leave them now—the young man to his labour of love, and the old to his care of the self from which he is so soon to part ; but we shall find them both again before the work allotted to each is over.

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## CHAPTER XV.

“ Ah ! little think the gay, licentious crowd,  
Whom pleasure, power, and affluence surround ;  
\* \* \* \* \*

Ah ! little think they ; as they dance along,  
How many feel, this very moment, death  
And all the sad variety of pain.”—THOMSON.

THERE was a very heavy shower falling, one cold February afternoon, in the Central District of London. It had commenced at one of those critical hours (pronounced to be such by weather-watchers) which decide the question of whether the remainder of the day is to be fine or otherwise ; and already there appeared upon the faces of pedestrians that tinge of despondency which is caused by the conviction that “ rain has set in.” In cities no one is in reality grateful for even the shortest shower. Men may say that the country requires it ;

but when it falls in London, where it is not wanted—when it drops on their own umbrellas, and interferes with their business or pleasure, they ungratefully bestow bad language on it, longing for a pavement unsullied by mud, and even dwelling almost lovingly on the recollection of the flying dust that calls for the mild shower-bath of the water-cart.

But in few parts of the great city do the effects of a thorough wet day tell more gloomily than in the squares of Lincoln's Inn. In the more busy thoroughfares, lined as they are on either side with thriving-looking shops, the very passing to and fro of the ant-like population gives such an appearance of life and animation, that the fall of the rain ceases to have so depressing an influence over the senses ; but in the neighbourhood of the law courts, and in the “Fields,” open and airy though they be, there is an imposing quiet, and an absence of busy “out-door” life, that makes the localities where lawyers vegetate gloomy enough to all but those who take their learned pastime therein. Defend us, then, we say, from the dignified dulness (on a rainy day) of Lincoln's Inn.

But we must now turn from the general view of that dismal region, and concentrate our observation on one spot, namely, the archway that forms one of the entrances to Lincoln's Inn Fields, on the western side.

Under its shelter (if shelter it could be deemed) stood a woman, poorly clad, and shivering. For many hours, during that dreary February day, had she been wandering abroad ; and the wet wind pierced her scanty garments through and through. She had been hurrying homewards (for she had an *attic* somewhere, an attic with unpapered walls and fireless grate), when the rain, suddenly increasing in violence, forced her to seek the dubious shelter of the archway. From that cold and wind-visited refuge she, with her thinly covered shoulders leaning against the brickwork of the arch, watched the world without in listless fashion, as though her thoughts were far away.

Hired vehicles, driven by moist men in reeking garments, and dragged by horses whose “go” was nearly over, and whose panting sides were shining with sweat and raindrops, passed her constantly. In those vehicles sat men with grave and anxious faces ; men who had given money for speed that they might the sooner listen to an opinion, or look into the copy of a will.

And besides these, stepping on in haste, and without a side-ward glance, were bedraggled females sent on household errands, while small boys hastened on with porter-pots in hand, and all these passed the weary woman by, and heeded her not.

For an hour she had stood there, and still the rain continued to fall on the dim window-panes, grim with the accumulated dirt of ages. Windows they were that looked as though all the storms of the sky, and all the water from the buckets of every housemaid under it, would be alike ineffectual to cleanse them from their stains. And still as she stood there, the heavy raindrops pattered down, and the bleak wind spared her not.

When Helen was driven ignominiously from Darrow House, she determined (and steadily kept her resolution) never again to expose herself to the bitter mortification of detection.

She had resolved that in her dealings with her neighbour she would be both honest and just, answering to the spirit as well as to the letter the questions asked her; and so doing, she would (she felt) have confidence, knowing that her own heart would not condemn her. Helen had heard it said—nay, she had even written the axiom in her copy-book when she was a little child, that “Honesty is the best policy;” she believed in the saying (God help her), when she told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, to the good “motherly lady” who advertised for a housekeeper, and to the really excellent head of a seminary for young gentlemen, where a matron was required. She was not quite sure that the old-fashioned and well-sounding truism was not a popular fallacy, even though a third and a fourth effort at employment were doomed to a cruel disappointment. But when, after repeated trials, she found that, though supported by the good word and high recommendation of Archdeacon Morton, no one would accept of her services, then she did despair and murmur, saying, in the bitterness of her spirit, “Am I never to be forgiven?”

Tens of hundreds of years ago, a saying among many wise ones was written for the enlightenment of mankind, “As long as a man doeth well for himself, men will speak well of him.” Human nature has not changed since those words were penned. We may even transpose them now, and let the text run thus, “As long as a man speaketh well of himself, men will do well for him.” To be humble and poor in spirit may

win a place in heaven, where there is room enough and to spare ; but in this overcrowded world of ours, where each man is jostling his neighbour for standing-room, he who is the loudest and boldest self-asserter will have by far the best chance of success.

It would be a sad as well as a useless task to follow Helen along the weary way, that never led her to the goal of her hopes, namely, the means of earning her own living by the exertion of her own energies of mind and body. She spent months in vain endeavours and in fruitless efforts, and at last found herself in the great peopled desert of London, friendless and well-nigh moneyless. For her being in a position so dismal and forlorn, the brother who had selfishly fleeced her was answerable ; for he had indeed tried her to the utmost, and had at last put the finishing stroke to his follies and to her anxieties by enlisting in a cavalry regiment about to proceed to India on active service. He had written to her, entreating that she would meet him, and bid him “God speed,” before he left his native land, perhaps to return no more ; and his sister could not resist the appeal.

It was a melancholy leave-taking ; for a sight which those who witness it do not readily forget is the rending asunder of husbands and wives, children and parents, lovers and their betrothed ; and long, long afterwards does the heart-wringing melody swelling out in the “Cheer, boys, cheer,” and the invocation to “The girl I left behind me,” come back upon the memory as an echo of those dismal partings.

As the weary, but to the end unselfish sister, standing on the deck of the huge war-steamer, pressed her last kiss on the cheek of that foolish, reckless boy, she forgot his misdeeds, and her heart seemed going with him to the battle-field on whose cold bosom he might so soon be stretched. It was hard to see him go. He had drained her purse till it was almost dry, “he had devoured her living with harlots, and wasted her substance in riotous living.” He had forgotten her in his wild extravagance ; forgotten that should he perish, all chance of repaying her for her sacrifices and her devotion would be at an end ; but what were these things to her ? He was her brother still, her only brother ; and so, forgiving all, she, with her heart heavy with foreboding fears, saw him go forth upon his way.

Were we to relate how humble were the offices Helen would have agreed to fill, if only she had been considercd worthy to

do so, the account would scarcely be believed. She was not permitted to wait by the sick-beds of wounded soldiers, or to wear out her strength and nerves by tending the insane or the epileptic. No “asylum,” of any kind, would engage her as an attendant ; and the humblest servant’s place was shut against her. “No sinner need apply;” verily if this rule of exclusion were strictly adhered to, small indeed would be the number of those by whom “situations” would be obtained !

Helen, as we have shown, failed utterly, and thus it was that she found herself at last alone in her dismal attic, with but a few shillings in her possession, and with no earthly friend to temper the wind of adversity that blew upon her.

On that rainy February day when the wanderer stood shivering beneath the archway in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, she had in the early morning bethought her of one to whom she could apply in her need, with a hope that he would assist her with his advice, and put her in the way of obtaining the object of her wishes. This person was a solicitor of some repute, and an old acquaintance of her father’s, who lived, or rather who “got his living,” in Lincoln’s Inn.

With difficulty she had found his chambers ; but, alas ! when she had succeeded, and had read the name she sought in large black letters on the dingy door-post, she found to her great disappointment that Mr.—was absent. There were several clerks writing, or seeming to write, in a small room into which she found entrance through a swing-door ; and one of them, after reminding her that it was Saturday, on which day his employer never attended to business, laid down his pen, and stared at her. The tired woman turned from those not very respectful-looking young men, discouraged and heart-sick ; but before the green door closed behind her, she was recalled by a question from the oldest of the clerks :

“Would she leave a message ? Could he be of any service to her ? ” And he winked a knowing wink at his companions.

Helen thanked him, but she would leave no card, nor was her business one of importance ; and so she left them. The young men of business commented on her anxious, eager manner, and on her pale, but still lovely face ; and one of them—he of the knowing wink—suggested that it was “a case of Waterloo Bridge, eh ! ” But he was in error there, for Helen was not the kind of woman to sink voluntarily into any

slime, whether that of the dark, flowing river, or the worse moral mire that is swallowed in on city pavements. But her courage was well-nigh exhausted, for she had begun to talk to herself of the end, and to whisper lowly, after a mournful mental review of her life's chances, that after all she could but starve, could but lie down, and rest, in the grave where the weary are at peace. These were easy words to say, easier than if the woman had ever tried to do that which it gave her so small a pang to contemplate; but the truth was, that the poor creature wanted rest. She was tired of the rough way that through weary months she had been treading; and to sleep, even though that sleep should be her last, seemed the sweetest boon for which her soul was thirsting. Doubtless, physical weakness had some share in producing the utter discouragement so foreign to her normal state of feeling, for she had not tasted food for hours, and had walked many a mile that day; no wonder then that, looking out upon life from beneath her temporary shelter, the prospect seemed charged with gloom.

So lost was she in melancholy reverie (uninviting as the mental occupation seemed), that she did not notice the advent of a second person, who, driven like herself by stress of weather, had taken up his station under the arch, and stood motionless beside her. A few minutes passed away, and then the gentleman (for he seemed one) bent forward to see if the violence of the storm had abated. Then Helen saw his face! Saw that it was Philip! Changed and aged, but still Philip, still her early love, still the friend most dear to her!

Let her be forgiven—poor wayworn wanderer that she was—for the wild throb of joy that vibrated through her heart-strings. She was so world-despised, so entirely friendless, and cold and hunger were gnawing at the springs of life. He was married—she knew that he was his wife's—and would not have appealed to him in his home for help, nor have written to tell him of her sufferings. But he was near her now—was within the reach of her hand, and the hearing of her softest whisper. She held her breath as she lent forward, and that breath came thicker still, as Philip, tired of waiting, took one step out into the still heavily-falling rain. And could she let him go thus? Go, without a word, a touch, a look of recognition and of kindness? Ah, no! for the love of the days gone by she could not; and so, with a wild beating at her heart, she stepped

towards him, and laid her thin hand lightly on his arm. He looked round quickly.

“ Philip,” she whispered ; and her voice was so changed and weak, that at first he failed to recognize it. It was like the dream of a tone that he had heard in days gone by, or as a sound of music to which he could give no name.

“ Oh, Philip,” she said again, “ do not you know me ? Can it be that you have quite forgotten Helen Langton ? ”

Forgotten her ? No, indeed, and a thousand times, no ! Does a man ever lose the memory of the one woman who has loved him only *as he is* and not for what *he has* ; loved him, not as the man by whose instrumentality she has escaped the stigma of old maidism, and risen to the dignity of wife and matron ; loved him, not for his position, but for himself ; not for his purse, but for the vows he swore to her ? No, though years had passed away, and though her cheek was hollow, and the lustre of her eyes was dimmed, Philip had not forgotten Helen Langton, and so he whispered to her as, pressing her cold hands in his, he poured forth words of tender pity.

“ My poor girl,” he cried, “ how ill you look, and altered ! Who has been cruel to you ? ”

Who, indeed ! Who but you, oh, selfish man, who having found a pearl of price—a lovely flower, blooming in obscurity—never thought to ask yourself whether the

“ Pearl has less whiteness,  
Because of its birth :  
Or the violet less brightness,  
For growing near earth ? ”

That gem might have been set among the jewels of your family, to add lustre to the glory of your ancestry ; that flower might have been transplanted, to flourish and bring forth blossoms in a kindlier soil ; but, instead, you flung the pearl away ; and, by the wayside, threw the faded flower, robbed of half its sweetness. And now, after a long season, you have found that flower again, but so trampled on and crushed, that you scarcely knew it for the blooming thing you had once worn proudly on your heart.

But what joy it was to her to hear again the sound of loving words, only those can know who have pined beneath the heart’s starvation. To her wretched attic room she took him ; and there, clad in the miserable garments that made her seem so

unlike the Helen of former days, she poured forth all her history. And when her tale was told, she learnt from the man against whose breast she leaned that he, too, had known sorrow, and, looking into his worn face, she saw its traces there.

Very rude had been the winds that had blown over that blighted flower ; and hard enough, God knows, had been the hearts of those who, seeing it deserted and forsaken, had passed it by unheeded ; but Philip had found again the frail and fragile thing, and, taking it to his bosom, gave it warmth and shelter.

Helen never lived with Thornleigh at the old Abbey, nor did the dread faces ever frown upon her from the oaken panels, but she was with him always, if not in bodily presence, in the heart and in the spirit. And he told her all his grief, and the burthen of shame that had been laid upon him, and she (and in his heart he blessed her for it) would not believe in Gertrude's guilt, nor would allow that his case was a hopeless one.

Does this unselfish love seem an impossible thing to those who watch jealously over the affections of those in whom their own is garnered up (as it seems to them) for ever? Do they say that this woman could not have defended the wife, had she truly loved the husband—could not have pleaded for the children, had her heart been devoted to the father?

If there be women who argue thus, the answer is, that they have never loved as Helen loved. The days of wild and all-engrossing passion were over, and with them that portion of love which is selfishness, had passed away for ever. She saw him often listless, careworn, and discontented. She felt herself insufficient to supply all the cravings of the heart that pined for the children he had lost, and for the quiet, respectable home-happiness which, as life wears on, is so precious to men who have this world's goods to enjoy, and to leave behind them.

Oh, poor, imprudent women ! ye who think all of the joys of the moment, and nothing of the middle and of the old age, when the passions of most men grow weak, and when you, who have been only a pastime and a source of momentary enjoyment, become, at the best, but a poor substitute for the legitimate interests which alone men really value, how melancholy is your lot! How often must you have to dwell with bitter sorrow for the changed and moody brow, and, perhaps,

for the angry and disrespectful word ! How often must you say to yourselves, “Would that I had not sinned ! Would that I were not despised !”

Such trials as these, however, did not fall to Helen’s lot ; for Philip was never irritable, and rarely allowed her to witness his attacks of despondency. But who can deceive a woman, especially a true-hearted one, who knows herself wanting, and who is prepared, at all points, for any of the emergencies of life ? And Helen was prepared, and ready, at any moment, to be up and doing “with a heart for every fate.” Her great trial rose in the person of Mrs. Wraxham, Philip’s cousin ; for that baneful woman seemed to be ever at hand to work mischief and to do ill. To induce Philip to sue for a divorce from his banished wife had, in the early days of the separation, been her constant endeavour, and once she had nearly succeeded in her object. The occasion alluded to was that of her presenting her cousin with a letter, which, she averred, she had opened by mistake. It was addressed to Lady Thornleigh, and contained these few lines :—

“I cannot discover the exact date of *the death*, for, as you are well aware, we had parted company some time before I told you of the report. I remained with him as long as I could venture to associate with one whose character was blackening day by day ; if I can learn anything further on a subject of such vital importance to your son’s interests, you shall be the first to be informed of my discoveries.”

This letter was shown to Thornleigh about a month after Gertrude’s flight. It had neither date nor signature, but was written in the hand he knew so well, and had such fatal reasons for remembering ! He asked no questions of his cousin as to the manner in which the letter fell into her hands, but read it with deep attention, and then pondered deeply on its contents. No light was (through those written words) thrown on the mystery which veiled Lady Thornleigh’s conduct ; but, on the contrary, the darkness had become deeper and more impenetrable than ever. Philip shrank from rushing into it—shrank as do those who, when constrained to move within a room where thick darkness reigns, recoil in affright from imaginary obstacles, holding out protecting hands to save themselves from blows and pain. But Mrs. Wraxham, persevering, restless, and ambitious, would not allow him to take the side of mercy with impunity, nor suffer the man by whom her vanity

had been wounded to escape unpunished. She had her surmises likewise, to which many a small corroborative testimony lent weight, that in Lady Thornleigh's early history there was that which might affect the legitimacy of the heir apparent to Philip's title and estates.

To describe the manner in which, by means of these conjectures, she tortured her unhappy cousin would be impossible. She threatened law proceedings in the event of her surviving him, for she was for ever indulging the hope that Thornleigh Abbey might still be hers, and her son's after her. She was as a thorn in his side, and as a perpetual blister to an irritating wound. It was only Helen who could soothe him when he was thus tried and wearied by many cares—only Helen who could whisper words of comfort, and lay his spirit, like that of a tired child, to rest.

But in the heart of neither Philip nor Helen was the voice of conscience mute, for there were moments when the latter doubted the existence of the one cause for the which alone, by the laws of God, a wife may be “put away ;” and Helen, even while she strove to believe that she had not erred in returning to her wife-like duties, and in breathing again her vows of truthful love, trembled oft-times in the silence of the night, and feared to pray for a blessing on their lives.

And thus they lived together. Not openly and world-defyingly, nor with the passionate love of their early years tingling through their veins. But an affection, born of their former deep devotion, and nursed by the tender compassion that each felt for each, filled their hearts ; and together, half in sorrow and half in gladness, they passed their years away.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

“Il n'y a pour l'homme qu'un vrai malheur, qui est de se trouver en faute, et d'avoir quelque chose à se reprocher.”—LA BRUYÈRE.

“Les malheureux qui ont de l'esprit, trouvent des ressources en eux-mêmes.”—BONHOURS.

WHEN Helen left the bed in which lay the mortal remains of Philip, she broke forth into no vehement expressions of grief or of despair. She was, as we have shown, not a woman of many tears, for her nerves were strong, and the connection between them and what is called feeling is often near enough. She closed the eyes that had looked their last upon her, and after pressing a tender, reverential kiss upon his clay-cold brow, she left him there alone. Very near to those dear remains she laid her down ; and then, wearied with watching, she fell into a deep and untroubled slumber.

Who has not experienced a dislike almost amounting to loathing to the bright lustre of the morning sun, when it shines upon the awakening to a great sorrow ? What business has it there, that glowing, mocking light ? And thus asking, we shun and shrink from it ; and covering our faces with a mantle, we turn them to the wall. Even thus did Helen feel, when (awakening after the heavy sleep of utter exhaustion) she knew that another day, with its sorrows, its trials, and its responsibilities, had dawned upon her life.

She was no longer young, and the elasticity of her spirit had lost something of its spring ; moreover she had enjoyed a long respite from grief and anxiety, and we all know how unwelcome is often the necessity for exertion, after a period of protracted rest.

She was close to him. A door, that she half fancied was open, led from *that* room into the one on the couch of which she had thrown herself. It had been *his* dressing-room, and all within it spoke of the daily habits of him who would enter it no more. On one table were costly ornaments of crystal

and of china ; while on another, the luxurious toilet “stood displayed.”

“Each silver vase in mystic order laid.”

His last toilet had been made now, and that masterpiece of expensive ingenuity, the dressing-case, whose cost might have served as a little fortune, conducive, perhaps, to the saving both of a soul and body, must be laid by as a wasted thing. Flashing across the brain of the waking and half-bewildered woman came some such thoughts as these, and then, remembering the goodness and mercy of Him who knoweth all things, she prayed that the sins of omission engendered by force of habit, might not be recorded against him whose soul that night had been required of him. She rose from her couch as if moved by no will of hers ; for at that moment life seemed to have for her neither an object nor a wish. She had not undressed ere she slept, and haggard and worn was the face she saw reflected in the large mirror, as she stood before it. For the first time in her life a feeling of utter despondency stole over her, and creeping back to her pillow, she turned her face again to the wall and groaned aloud.

It was a recollection of the responsibility that rested on her, that proved the best stimulant to her sinking spirit. There was nothing cowardly in that woman's nature, and you could read how brave it was in the eyes that looked at you—not boldly—but openly and confidently. Since the time that she had been driven by her great distress to return to Philip's protection, she had half succeeded in convincing herself that starvation may be an excuse for sin ; but she was alone now, and remorse sprang again from the void that Death had made, and looked her steadily in the face. Then she reflected on what remained for her to do, in order that her sin might be put away from her ; and searching into her heart, she found the answer there. “Go and sin no more,” were the words she read ; and her own repentant conscience whispered her that she must begin her work at once, nor linger another hour in inaction, and in the cowardly indulgence of useless grief.

Her first impulse was to visit the room where he lay, once more to look upon his face, and to repeat over his senseless clay the promises she had made to him.

Her hand did not tremble as she laid it on the door-handle, for it was not in her character to feel any of that nameless

dread so often experienced by the living when in the presence of the dead who were once so dear to them : but who has not felt a shock when the eye first rests on the cold sheet beneath whose thin texture the hard, straight limbs lie clearly defined, and as though carved in marble ? Who has not shuddered at the sight of the face which is his, and yet can never beam again with joy at our approach, or at the dear words we say to him ? Ah ! sorrow is a selfish rather than a sacred thing. For whom do we mourn as we bend over the dead ? Is it for our departed brother or sister, who has seen the last day of danger and distress ? or is it for ourselves, who are left behind to feel our loss and to suffer on ?

Who can venture to decide on a motive, or search into the hidden springs of feeling ? There is but One can draw aside the veil from that unholly of unholies, the naked human heart ; and it is possible that even in the deep wail of that bereaved woman there was a jarring note that spoke of some selfish sorrow : still she mourned for *his* earthly loss, as well as for her own ; for he had been taken away in his strength, with that work undone which must now be finished by another ; and not for him could be used those conventional words of consolation, namely, that he had found in Death—a “ happy release ” from suffering.

There was a hired watcher in the room ; but so dark was the chamber of death, that Helen did not at first perceive that she was not alone. Alone, indeed, was she ! Hardly did she recognise her right to be there ; for well she knew that there are some who are so afraid of behaving themselves unseemly, that even the stern teacher Death brings no right knowledge home to them. And yet, who had a better right than she to watch beside the dust about to mingle with its fellow-dust, for had she not been as a faithful wife to him for years—and had not he loved and trusted her above all women ? Kneeling by his side she pressed her cheek for the last time against the cold, still heart, and then, rising with the words of a prayer upon her lips, she saw (with eyes now accustomed to the gloom) that a woman was looking coldly and curiously upon her. That woman well knew who the sorrowing lady was. She was Sir Philip’s mistress (the nurse would have used a coarser word), and as he was dead now (and there was no dowagerhood for the pale and humble-seeming mourner), respectful observance was not her due.

There was another purpose (besides that of bidding a last farewell to the dead) that had brought Helen into the room where the remains of Philip lay; and that purpose was no other than to obtain possession of the precious volume in which were written the words that with his dying fingers he had signed. She had forgotten it in her grief; and sought it anxiously; but to her surprise she found it not; and turning to the hired watcher, interrogated her thus:

“Has any one been here? I mean, any one besides those who were obliged to enter?”

“I can’t say who’s *oblieged* to come in, or who isn’t,” answered the woman, sulkily; “I takes my orders from them as has a right to give them.”

Too well did Helen recognise in that voice and demeanour the covert insult levelled at her own position; but nothing heeding it, she busied herself with opening a shutter, in order by the light of day the better to prosecute her search for the missing volume. In a moment the nurse’s hand was laid roughly on her own.

“You mustn’t do that,” she said, as she reclosed the shutter, “you mustn’t do that—daylight never comes where corpses is; now you go away, for there’s them will be coming soon, as won’t abide you near the body. You’d far better go away.”

It was no season and no place for anger, and though Helen was most unwilling to abandon her search, she so dreaded an altercation in that solemn presence, that without noticing the woman’s remarks, she left the room as silently as she had entered it. It was indeed a time of mortification as well as of sorrow, for her own maid, grown offensively familiar, addressed her as one far lower than an equal, and she was made to feel in every way that conviction could be brought home to her, that her business in that place was over.

Towards mid-day she received a message from Mrs. Wraxham, purporting that that lady required her immediate departure from the house. It never occurred to Helen to resist the order. She had almost forgotten Philip’s revelations concerning his will; or if she did recollect them, it was with a vague idea that all he had said would eventually appear to have been a mistake and a delusion. But she could not so easily forget the written words to which it had cost him so much of pain and effort to affix his signature; and feeling the importance of having those words in her possession, she strove, but strove in

vain, to obtain the volume which contained them. Once she made an attempt to enter again the bedroom where (in their coffin now) the remains of poor Philip rested ; but the doors were closed against her. Then, and in the dead of night, she left the house where she had known so much of happiness, so much of trusting friendship ; for though it had not been her home, many an hour had she spent in it ; and all that it contained were as familiar objects to her sight.

She was not a houseless wanderer now, for her own small home (the one provided by Philip's care) was still available for a time, and to that abode she at once returned.

The days between the death and the funeral passed mournfully and slowly on. Between the large house and the small there was kept up (by means of Helen's servants) a frequent communication, and well the exile knew the hour when hireling hands would close the coffin, and drive the nails above that precious but senseless form. On the day of the funeral a figure, closely veiled and clad in mourning, was remarked among the few who stood by Philip's grave. There were no deep mourners there save her, and the only sobs that spoke of sorrow, and the few tears that fell, were tributes from the woman who had no right to lament for him.

Poor Philip ! Far away and in another land were the wife and the children he had disowned ; and of the many friends who, in life, he had believed in, none had cared to depress their spirits by the gloomy spectacle of a funeral. So Helen was his chief mourner, though no black coach, drawn by high-plumed horses, had borne her to her place beside his grave.

The day after Philip Thornleigh's interment Mrs. Vaughan sat alone in a small but beautifully-furnished room, the boudoir of a tiny house in a western suburb. Her thoughts had wandered into the wilds of fancy, among the trees and flowers that were green and bright for happier hearts than hers, and far into the dark future, where no fresh blossoms grew. A ring at the bell aroused her from her reverie, and with a sensation of relief (for she was weary of her musings) she waited for that which was to follow.

Her suspense was not of long duration, for ere a minute had elapsed, she found herself in the presence of a stranger, by whom she was addressed respectfully—nay, even with some degree of obsequiousness.

“I have the honour, I presume, to address myself to Mrs.

Vaughan ?” asked the visitor, who had the outward semblance and bearing of that ill-defined thing called a “gentleman.”

Helen bowed her assent to the question.

“I am here, madam,” he continued; “on the part of Messrs. Tonkin and Davis, solicitors to the late Sir Philip Thornleigh, to acquaint you with the contents of the last testament made by that gentleman.”

Helen was silent, for she had no objection to make; and a feeling beginning to dawn upon her, that she was personally interested in the conversation, she listened with greater attention.

“Sir Philip,” continued the visitor, who seemed inflated with important intelligence, “Sir Philip has made a most extraordinary will. Passing over his lady, on whom it appears that no settlement beyond that of her own small fortune was made, the late baronet has named another lady as the *inheritress* (if I may so call it) of his fortune. Only the Abbey with its demesne is entailed. A bare six hundred pounds per annum to support a dignity so ancient and respected. The lady—youself, madam”—he added, with a bow, more to the golden idol than to her—“has now a clear twelve thousand pounds a year, and Sir Edgar, the present baronet, is almost a beggar !”

It was not a very business-like way of conveying the intelligence; but for once a lawyer’s impulses had burst their red tape and parchment bonds, and had spoken as though dictated by the nature of other men. The fact was, that Messrs. Tonkin and Davis had been too long in the possession of metal cases bearing on their smooth outsides the name and title of the baronets of Thornleigh, not to feel considerably indignant at the provisions of the will, made, and duly witnessed and signed by the deceased gentleman.

Fully aware of the nature of that testament (for it had been drawn up by themselves), the firm of Tonkin and Davis had always indulged in a hope that something would arise to change the dispositions of the testator. He was in the prime of life, strong and hale, and there was a son who must inherit the title, even though his father should alienate the estates. The lady in whose favour he had made so extraordinary a testament was *not* his wife, and was said to have unbounded influence over him; but, on the other hand, there was the chance that she might be caught “tripping,” and then farewell to her inheritance

of yearly thousands. She might die, too, before Sir Philip, and happily she had no child, at least as far as the firm knew, to inherit after her. But all these speculations were at an end when the news of Philip's death was spread abroad. The contents of the will were then made public, and it being pronounced valid, all that remained was to make known to the fortunate testatrix that she, and only she, was the legatee whose name appeared as interested in these parchment sheets.

As it has been shown, it was not by letter, but through the means of an ambassador (as is the case when an important communication is to be made to a first-rate power), that the accession of wealth was made known to Helen. The intelligence was received by her with perfect composure, she merely saying :—

“ You seem more surprised than I am by this disposition of Sir Philip Thornleigh's property. It is one that I deeply regret, but which is surely not out of my power to remedy.”

“ Pardon me,” replied the man of law, “ Sir Philip has deprived you of the power of changing his intentions, so far, at least, as the giving over this property to others is concerned. In the event of your declining to accept of this rich inheritance, it reverts to charitable institutions named in the will.”

“ This may increase the difficulty of doing justice to others,” said Helen ; “ but I can see no insuperable obstacles to the performance of what is so clearly a duty. I thank you for your visit, and shall communicate by letter with the gentlemen whose address you have given me.”

Never was hint for the closing of an audience more clearly given. So pointed, also, were the words for a dismissal, both by voice and manner, that the envoy of Messrs. Tonkin and Davis could do no other than take up his hat and go.

He did not leave Helen alone, for who is alone whose whereabouts is peopled with busy thoughts, and who, in life's arduous duties, finds a theme so engrossing that it bars out the sense of solitude ? Who is alone when he has a problem to solve, or a resolution to arrive at ? Not even a woman is solitary, when her unseen companions are high thoughts and determinations, founded on honourable principles ; and when (avoiding an indulgence in tender and enervating imaginings) she braces her mind to endurance and to self-sacrificing deeds.

The sudden death of Sir Philip Thornleigh would have been soon forgotten but for the unrighteous testament which kept

alive the memory of the man. We are longer remembered for our evil deeds than for our good ; for how short is the list of those who, by purely disinterested love for their fellow-creatures, have obtained a name that is beyond praise ? The powerful, the ambitious, the cruel, and the rich are in their deeds handed down to posterity by hundreds ; but let us name the few who, beyond the pale of private charity, stand out as the doers of good to those that are in sorrow, sickness, and adversity, and the record will soon be closed. In the prisons and among the captives a Howard and a Fry have worked and ministered. The “Man of Ross” is cited for benevolence, and Florence Nightingale for her devotion to the sick and wounded ; but among the thousands who, since the world began, might, if they would, have done deeds like theirs, the recorded names seem a scanty few indeed.

Sir Philip Thornleigh’s unjustifiable crime against society was something more than a nine days’ wonder. He had turned his wealth into a channel where, in his county at least, it could benefit no one. The time-honoured abode of his fathers would be no longer open to receive its former guests, nor would his son (the Sir Edgar pointed out by nature as the husband of one of their fair daughters) be in a position to fulfil the duties of his calling.

Sir Edgar had only his empty title to recommend him to their notice ; what he *had not* was registered against him, while what the son of their old acquaintance *was*, few thought it worth their while to inquire.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

“Quicquid sub terris est, in apricum proferet actas ;  
Defodiet condetque nitentia.”—HORACE.

AND now, waiving the customary apology for conducting the reader suddenly to another scene, we will take a glance at Philip’s condemned wife, who, with her sister, still resided in the little château in Lower Brittany. They were not reduced to what could be called, in their rank of life, poverty, though

Gertrude had refused the allowance which Thornleigh, through his solicitors, had pressed upon her ; for they had the interest of their own small fortunes, which amounted to about three hundred pounds a year ; and as the little Edgar had been adopted by his grandmother, who paid liberally for his education, this income was amply sufficient for their wants.

In outward appearance Gertrude was greatly changed ; her auburn hair was streaked with grey, and the lines on her brow had become deeper and more numerous ; for the possession of a secret is to many women a serious charge, even though that secret be not such a one as preyed upon the heart and conscience of Philip's wife.

Let us look at her now, as, in the deepest mourning, with low-bent head and eyes swollen with weeping, she creeps along beneath the trees that shade their dwelling. Alice is by her side, and is supporting her feeble footsteps with an arm that seems scarcely strong enough for the task.

It was the first time that they had left the house since the news came that one they loved was dead ; and the fresh air, instead of reviving their drooping spirits, seemed but to open their wounds afresh. There were lofty fir-trees where they walked ; and they listened mournfully to the wail of the wind through the branches. The souls of both had sympathy with the sound. It was one that in happier days they had loved in their old home in England, and they shuddered involuntarily as memory whispered to them of the past.

“I cannot bear it,” sobbed Gertrude ; “there is such horror in my thoughts. I cannot imagine him as you say he is—dead—buried. It seems to me but yesterday that we were together, loitering—do you remember it, Alice ?—in the wood where the children loved to play—it was so dark and thick. And he was with us, and Edgar and Marie threw the gathered fir-cones at him in their sport. How happy he looked ! How full of boyish spirits !”

“Happy !” responded her sister, sadly ; “yes, he was happy then ; and well do I remember how he looked that day, so high-hearted and so generous. Never, no never, will I believe that he died without—”

“Hush, Alice ; do not speak of that. I warned you that it is more than I can endure.” And the weak woman's tears broke forth afresh, and choked her utterance.

Alice sighed heavily. She found it very hard to deal with

her sister's grief, embittered as she feared it was by her remorse ; for Lady Thornleigh had never trusted the girl with her dark secret ; and there were moments when that confiding heart almost feared the worst. Most true it was that the arrow that had struck at poor Gertrude's breast, was barbed by the reflection that death had claimed her husband ere he had forgiven her ; and that now he was, perhaps, beyond the knowledge that her punishment was greater than she deserved. How often and how sadly did all the memories of her married life come crowding upon her ; urging her to a longing (almost verging on the morbid cravings of insanity) to hold communion with him who was gone hence and would be no more seen. In weariness often, and in anguish of mind beyond description, did she repeat those saddest of all words, “Too late ;” and Alice sighed to hear the remorseful groan, breathed forth even in the stillness of the night.

The unhappy woman had never contemplated so sudden an end to her long estrangement from Philip ; nor had it ever crossed her imagination as a possibility, that *he* would be the first to die.

She had had visions of her own deathbed and of a pardoning husband leaning over her pillow, and imprinting on her dying brow the dear kiss of reconciled affection. But what was the hopeless reality ! He was no longer an inhabitant of this earthly world ; they had parted in enmity, never to meet again ; and she was wandering alone beneath the rocking branches, with the wild wind wailing above her head : far from home and country, with ruined fortunes and a blighted reputation !

The sisters sat down on a fallen tree, and Alice threw back her veil, that the wind might blow over her flushed and tear-stained cheeks. She, too, was altered, but in some respects the change was for the better. The fresh beauty of early womanhood had passed away, but in its place had come a loveliness that was for all time. Daily and anxious thought for the feeble ones committed to her care had added pallor to her cheek, and filled the violet eyes with such deep feeling, that they seemed even softer than of yore ; while, though she rarely laughed, her smile (ere this crushing blow came) was frequent and singularly beautiful.

To little Marie Thornleigh Alice had ever been dearer than aught else on earth ; for from her earliest infancy the child

could not remember either the hour or the day when the girl-aunt was not ready to be happy with her, or to sympathise in her sorrows.

The selfishness of children is as much part and parcel of their being as is the instinct of “self-preservation,” which is said by sages to be the first law of nature; and it was the working of that quality in Marie’s mental constitution that caused her to shrink, almost with dislike, from the sight of her mother’s melancholy face, while she sunned herself in the light of Alice’s smile in her happy home at Thornleigh.

It was, perhaps, well for both the young aunt and her little niece, that they had early been removed from the surroundings of enervating luxuries, and had been cast upon their own mental resources, before habit had unfitted them for the exertion that gives strength.

The regrets of Alice Ellerton were almost exclusively for others, as, after the first chill of disappointment had subsided, she found cause for self-congratulation in her escape from a union with Francis Herbert; but there was something very trying even to a nature so unselfish as hers, in the constant spectacle of Gertrude’s depression,—a depression from which she never rallied, and the gloom of which was never enlivened by the most transient ray of brightness.

And in the early days of their sojourn at Kelhouet, even Marie was a disappointment and an occasion of distress; for she was for ever lamenting over her lost pleasures, grieving over the absence of her living pets, and longing for the companionship of her absent brother.

It was then that Alice perceived how much there was for her to do, in disciplining the infant mind, as yet untaught by the lessons of the stern rugged nurse, Adversity; and how sacred was the duty that had devolved upon her of leading her little niece to draw from the well of her own sorrows, sympathy with those of others.

It was a hard task to make the spoilt child of luxury forget herself; but as the mildly yet constantly administered lessons took effect, what hitherto undiscovered sources of enjoyment sprung up in that young heart!

There was not a bud that peeped out from its nest of leaves but Marie watched it anxiously, in the hope that the flower’s beauty and fragrance might give pleasure to her suffering mother; and as for sacrifices, there were none that she would

not gladly have made for those to whom she knew herself to be so dear. All this improvement, however, in the child's character was not effected in a day, but was the result of a long and sometimes tedious process, the more sure and certain because it was the well-done work of time.

And thus years passed away, and they had grown accustomed to their retirement, and attached to the little château wherein they dwelt. It was a pretty nest, sheltered by huge walnut-trees, with a pleasant garden in front, in which bloomed gorgeous flowers. The roof was of slate, and sharply pointed, and from a pigeon-house near, the doves flew and fluttered, cooing softly their never-tired love-notes.

Happy is the child-girl, and happier still the woman, who has passed through her days of danger in the undefiled paradise of flowers ! With no breath but theirs to mingle with her own, and with no touch less delicate than that of roses, to rest upon her glowing fingers, she can exhaust much of her warm affections on those bright children of the soil ; and the inborn love of creating, of nursing, and of rearing, with which all women are blessed (or cursed) can (when other passions have not already destroyed the taste for simple and innocent excitements) find happy exercise in the manual culture of a garden.

The exiles had a few acquaintances and one friend in their adopted country. The former were quiet simple people, “keepers at home,” and living in patriarchal fashion.

There was a hearty kindness about them that charmed Alice, and a true hospitality that was far above and beyond the conventional “Glad to see you's” of more artificial society. Their hours were early, and their fare was frugal ; but it was a pleasant thing to hear their truthful welcome ; and it mattered little that the *bouilli* beef was tasteless and stringy, and the pears and plums (which were the staples of the meal) but half ripened by the sun ; for warm hearts beat beneath their homely garments, and the dinner of herbs was seasoned with words of hearty kindness.

The acquaintances lived not far away, and often a stout old Carlist count or baron, shod in mud-defying *sabots*, would find his way to Kelhouet, on some mission of good-will to its gentle inmates ; but the one friend's home was situated at a greater distance, and it was only by means of a carriage that the château she inhabited could be reached.

Through the curious country where the ancient Druids wor-

shipped lay the road that led to the château of the Marquise de Pontarlec. There were “Dolmens,” giant masses of stone, more vast and numerous than those of our own Stonehenge, in the neighbourhood of that quaint old castle, and around it was a moat in which time-honoured carp rolled lazily, and all undisturbed by the destroying hand of man. The old Marquise was very fond of Marie, whom she called her *Mignonne*; and was always rejoiced when the girl, then a fresh, delicate maiden of some fifteen summers, was permitted to spend a few days with her in the silent château among the “Dolmens.”

Marie was absent on one of those visits when the intelligence of her father’s death reached Kelhouet, and Alice, ever ready to undertake the painful tasks of life, proceeded at once to Auray (the town near which the château stood), and sent for the orphan girl.

It was a grievous thing to blight the early joy-blossoms in that happy nature; grievous to watch the poor child’s quivering lip, while she learned that the father of whom her memory was so vivid, would never see his little girl again.

“Let me go home,” she sobbed, as soon as she found words to speak, “dear sister Alice” (for so she always called her aunt); “let me go to Kelhouet; take me to poor mamma.”

But to this proposal Alice would not agree. “No, Marie,” she said; “no, poor child, you must stay here awhile. Your mother is ill and nervous, and it may be that her presence will be wanted elsewhere. Madame de Pontarlec is so kind and good, that you will not want for sympathy; and just now, believe me, that the seeing you will but add to your poor mother’s sorrow.”

Gentle and easily led, Marie soon resigned herself to the temporary absence that was required of her; and Alice returned to watch over her almost distracted sister, whose revelations of the past in the first hours of her distress, she felt might be such as should meet her ears alone.

On the first Sunday after their affliction Alice Ellerton went alone to offer up her prayers to God. In her own heart’s language she poured forth her supplications, kneeling on the paved floor of the old church, with the benign image of the mother of our Lady, the gracious St. Anne of Auray, looking down upon her devotions.

The air was filled with incense, and the sacred edifice was crowded with kneeling figures. The solemn music of the

Mass service swelled forth in a rich volume of religious sound, and deep reverence and silence reigned throughout the lofty temple, during the intervals of prayer and praise. The creed was not her creed, nor was the tongue her tongue ; but this the English girl heeded not, as she bowed her head beneath those soul-inspiring sounds.

When the service was over she prepared to leave the church, but the crowd was great, and she therefore delayed her departure till some of the congregation should have gone out before her. As she waited in the aisle, there passed in their outward course many a holiday-dressed peasant-girl in tall white cap and crimson petticoat ; while not a few of the other sex, with flowing locks, full “braises,”\* and gaily trimmed jackets, gave a respectful nod of recognition to the “Sassenach” lady, as they left the church.

It was then that a figure, differing greatly in appearance from the rest, attracted her attention. It was that of a lady in deep mourning, tall and finely formed. She stood so near to Alice that their garments almost touched, and the latter was looking at the stranger with some little curiosity, when she heard these words murmured softly in her ear.

“Miss Ellerton—for I cannot be mistaken in my belief that it is she whom I am addressing—may I speak to you alone ? I have come to see you on important business, business in which you and those you love are deeply interested.”

Alice was taken by surprise, for the voice was a strange one to her, and in that “dim, religious light,” and concealed by the thick folds of her crape veil, the features of the speaker were undiscernible. She could only say in reply :

“Certainly, I am going home ; pray return with me.” But the presence of the veiled lady seemed in some sort to oppress her, and her heart beat faster than usual. The stranger’s next words did not tend to reassure her.

“No, not home—not at least to Lady Thornleigh’s home. You do not know me, you could not know me. But—No, I cannot say it—only I was with Sir Philip Thornleigh when he died, and I bear a message from him to his wife.”

Alice uttered a faint exclamation of joy.

They were standing in the light of day now, and through the dusky crape she could discern a true woman’s face, pale and sad.

\* Nether garments—an exaggeration of knickerbockers.

“Oh, come at once,” she cried, “come to my poor sister ; she has so longed for one word from Philip. I do not know you, perhaps I ought not to ask you to take this trouble ; but I cannot feel that a friend of my poor brother’s is a stranger to me.”

Helen threw back her veil. Did she imagine that the sight of her uncovered face would reveal the truth to that unsuspecting being, and that thus the pain of explanation would be spared her ? If this were her belief, she was mistaken ; for she was obliged to have recourse to words.

“I will speak to you,” she said, “before God’s altar. Let us go into His House ;” and they two went in.

Helen leant against a massive pillar in the nave ; while Alice, who was weak and trembling, supported herself by resting her small clasped hands on the back of a *Prie-Dieu* ; and looking in the face of her strange companion, seemed asking for explanation.

Helen returned the gaze unflinchingly, and as she did so, some of the old bitterness born of the world’s, and of woman’s scorn of her, flashed out.

“Ay, look at me,” she said, “look at the woman branded with shame, who has dared to touch with her polluted finger the hem of your garment. The creed of some Christian women says that I have no right either to speak to, or to come near the pure and good. And they are right—God help me ! But I will go soon, and trouble you no more.”

Alice was alarmed ; and an idea occurring to her that she was addressed by one whose intellects were disordered, she looked round her as though for protection.

“Nay, do not fear me,” said Helen, upon whom the expression of her companion’s countenance was not lost. “Do not fear me, for I am sane as you are. The curse of madness is not on me ; only I have been sinful, wearied, and persecuted.”

“God help you !” ejaculated Alice.

“And now I am come to make confession,” pursued Helen, a little encouraged by the tone of Alice’s last words, “and in what more fitting place can it be made than here—where, when but two are together, God himself has said, ‘that He is in the midst of them?’”

Alice bowed her head reverently.

“Listen to me,” continued the agitated woman. “My name is Helen Langton—the name I went by : *Vaughan*.

Have you never heard of me? Search your memory, and think, if in days gone by, you have never caught whispered words in which my name was uttered as that of an unholy thing.”

“Never,” said Alice, faintly, while something whispered to her what that strange woman was.

“Never! well, that makes my task the harder;” and she paused as if doubting how to proceed.

“Oh! speak, pray! let me hear what you wished to say,” said Alice, impatiently; for she recollects Gertrude, and the uneasiness her lengthened absence would occasion.

“Have patience with me,” said the poor woman; “you will loathe me soon enough. You will fly from me as from a pestilence, when you know me for what I am—for the wretch who *lived with* Sir Philip Thornleigh—lived with him for years, and was his consolation when he was left alone.”

“You?” gasped the listener, and the wrongs of her sister seemed magnified a thousand fold as she gazed wildly at the woman who had supplanted her.

“Yes—even me—and said I not rightly that you would look upon me with loathing? And yet, what was there left for me to do?” continued she in a softer tone. “He was unhappy, and feared that he had been wronged. All were gone, even his poor little children; and I—why, I had been almost his wife for years before he ever knew your sister. I do not speak of *my* wrongs—of the vows of endless constancy he swore to me; or of mine to him; which I swear, before Heaven, were truly kept! But I do say that he should be forgiven by her who drove him to the sin.”

“You must not speak so of my poor sister,” faltered Alice; “indeed you must not.”

“Pardon me; but it is of Lady Thornleigh that I must speak. Since yesterday at noon I have been endeavouring to find an opportunity of conversing with you alone; for I would fain spare your sister the pain, and what she would doubtless consider the degradation, of a personal interview with one who has fallen so low as I have.”

Alice signed to her to proceed.

“I have said that I was with your brother-in-law when he lay dying—but oh! may I never again witness so sad a spectacle! Poor Philip!” and for a moment she covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out a painful vision) “poor

Philip, he saw strange visions as he stood on the threshold of the world to come ; and in one of those visitors he thought he recognized his wife.”

Alice wept, and, with the tears dropping on her clasped hands, said imploringly :

“ And then ? Oh, tell me something of his last moments that will console his widow. Let me be the bearer of a message to her from her dead husband.”

“ Be patient, and you shall know all. Philip’s death-bed was not altogether uncheered by hope—hope for his children here, and for the pardon of his own sins hereafter. A blessed feeling, amounting almost to a conviction of his wife’s truth, stole over his senses at the last ; and he bade me say to her, that even though erring he forgave her ; and her name, mingled with those of his children, were the last sounds he uttered ere he breathed his last.”

“ God be thanked ! ” was Alice’s solemn thanksgiving, and then a feeling indescribable to herself induced her to take the hand of that messenger of glad tidings, and press it against her own warm heart. Helen’s swelled with fervent gratitude, for that moment was a compensation for many a past suffering.

“ God bless you ! ” she ejaculated, as soon as the gasp in her throat permitted her to speak. “ God bless you ! for you, a pure, good woman, have not scorned the touch of the poor sinner’s hand. And ah ! believe me when I say that did the world contain more of charity such as yours, there would be in it fewer such as I am. But now, if I may venture to advise, I would suggest your return to Lady Thornleigh, and that you should at once inform her of all that I have said to you. This done, you must prepare her to hear more ; for a most important portion of my mission has yet to be fulfilled. I shall remain in the town, and you will, I trust, let me know the effect of your communication, and will inform me when and where we can meet again.”

But little more passed between them ere they parted ; Helen, to enter with a relieved heart her spacious room on the first story of the “ Lion d’Or ;” and Alice to impart to her widowed sister the intelligence of her singular interview with the friend who had smoothed Philip Thornleigh’s pillow at the last, and had listened to his parting words.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

“Heaven’s Sovereign saves all beings but Himself  
That hideous sight—a naked human heart.”

YOUNG’S NIGHT THOUGHTS.

“Le parjure est une vertu  
Lorsque le serment fait un crime.”—VOLTAIRE.

IT was with very conflicting feelings that Gertrude listened to Alice’s account of her interview with the stranger. Her first sensation was one of joy that she had been remembered, and of deep gratitude for the forgiving message that had been vouchsafed to her. But after a while less holy thoughts rose in her breast, filling it with a jealous bitterness against the woman who had lain on Philip’s heart, and shared his secrets. True, she had deceived him ; not indeed with the deception of which he had accused her, but still after a manner that had brought a cloud upon her name and upon his honour ; and therefore she had no right to visit with her anger either the husband who had turned to another for consolation, or the woman who had helped him to forget his suspected wife. In this fashion might Lady Thornleigh have reasoned with herself, and thus have kept down the evil thoughts that were surging within her ; but this she cared not to do, and merely said, in a calm, cold tone to her sister :—

“Alice, I will see this lady—this Helen Langton, or Vaughan, or by whatever name she may be called.”

Alice was pained by her tone, nor was she quite willing that her sister should meet the stranger who, despite herself, had interested her so deeply ; but judging from her own heart, she could not forbear saying :—

“Would you see her ? Later perhaps you might, for his eyes were closed by her hands, and that is a sacred bond.”

“But one that after all, perhaps, does not exist, Alice. We have no proof that this person is even what she says she is ; and her story may likewise be possibly an invention.”

“Hush, Gertrude,” interrupted her sister ; “would you lose your belief in this new-born comfort ? You were not used to be so suspicious and distrustful. Have you no faith in my discernment ? Believe me, the heart is rarely deceived ; and I would stake my existence on this woman’s truth.”

“Forgive me,” said Gertrude, humbled and regretful. “I am very weak and foolish, Alice, but you do not know how heavy is the weight of sorrow laid upon me. Could you but guess what I suffer, you would wonder that I have not long since sunk under the burthen.”

“Poor Gertrude ! Believe me that I would gladly share it with you ; gladly take the load off your heart, and bear it on my own. You are not strong enough in nerves and spirits to see the stranger yet ; but I will go to her, and learn more. Then, if you still desire it, you may have an interview with one who seems to feel for us so sincerely ; and may the sight of her give you comfort, instead of the pain which I fear would be the consequence of the meeting.”

On the following day Alice was listening with breathless interest to the details of Philip’s dying testament and latest wishes. The reader knows already what that testament contained, and what those latest wishes were ; and to Alice they did indeed seem most incongruous and extraordinary : nevertheless, as she rose to leave the room where the lengthened dialogue had been carried on, she held out her hand to Helen.

“We shall meet again,” she said ; “for whatever may be the course of conduct decided on by my sister when she learns this strange history, we at least shall, I trust, be friends. I regret that you have not with you the volume, in which was written a document so important ; but you have shown me letters, and have told me enough to prove that you have deserved better at our hands than to be answered coldly and by letter. Pray say that you will not leave this place without informing me of your intention ; pray promise me that we shall meet again.”

“It were better not,” said Helen, sadly ; “believe me, it were better not. But you have yet to learn how women such as I are spoken of, and how just and heavy is the condemnation with which they are visited ; and should the world know of our meeting here, even you, blameless as you are, would not escape calumny.”

“But this is not the world,” said Alice ; “in this quiet

place, if anywhere, our sayings and our doings may pass unheeded.”

“True,” responded Helen; “and as I have entrusted the secret of my hurried journey to no living soul, I may perhaps venture, for another day, to remain in your neighbourhood, and, without injury to you, may see you once again.”

This being settled, and an early hour on the following morning having been fixed on for their parting interview, Alice mounted her pony, and returned to Kelhouet.

A rapid trot of her little Breton steed soon brought Miss Ellerton to the Château, and there the first object that met her eyes was Gertrude, pacing rapidly along the gravel walk before the door.

“Alice,” she exclaimed, “before you tell me anything that has passed, answer me one question, and describe to me, in a few words, this Helen that you have been visiting.”

“A few words!” said Alice, faintly. “That would be small measure in which to portray a beauty and a charm that I have rarely seen equalled.”

“But tell me, is she dark or fair, and is her form slight or of large proportions? I saw a miniature once, hidden among poor Philip’s most cherished possessions, and asked him of whom it was the likeness, but he refused to satisfy my curiosity. The face was a very beautiful one, the hair dark, and the eyes long-shaped and sleepy. But the smile! Oh! Alice, it was such a smile, the sweetest and the brightest I ever saw.”

“There was no smile on the face I saw to-day,” said her sister, gravely. “Strange, indeed, if there had been. From your description, however, I have little doubt that Mrs. Vaughan is the original of the portrait guarded so carefully by our poor Philip. But what of this, dear Gertrude? and why are you so anxious to identify——”

“Surely,” interposed her sister, eagerly, “surely you must be as desirous as I am to be convinced that this woman is at least no impostor—no inventor of lies to deceive us?”

She spoke with vehemence, but Alice replied with even more than her wonted gentleness.

“Forgive me for my dulness, dear sister, but had you seen Mrs. Vaughan as I have seen her, and had you watched her words and countenance as I have done to-day, you would hardly be surprised that all memory of your doubts should have escaped me. And now that I have answered your questions,

you must listen to me, and after hearing the statement that has been made to me, you must decide on the course of conduct you will pursue.”

The summer sun had already passed its meridian, when the sisters, seated under a spreading lime-tree, held their colloquy. Lady Thornleigh listened in silence while Alice revealed to her the almost incredible details concerning Sir Philip’s last testament, and his ultimate instructions to Helen concerning it.

“And now,” she added, when all was told, “now, Gertrude, surely the time has come when you will remember the interests of your children, and will, if it be within your power, redeem their name, and your own, from suspicion and disgrace.”

The appeal was urgent, but it was made in vain.

“You urge me on a matter about which you are not qualified to judge,” said Gertrude, coldly. “But you might at least give me credit for disinterestedness, and believe that I would scarcely do that for worldly gain which I had refused to your entreaties, and to the commands of my husband. The same obstacles are in my way now that stood, during that time of trial and wretchedness, between me and my justification. Till those obstacles shall be removed, disgrace, suspicion, and poverty must be my portion. But I will see this person—I will stand before this appointed judge of my conduct, and do homage to this arbitress of my fate. A fitting one truly is she ! Think of it, Alice. Sir Philip’s mistress sitting in judgment on Philip Thornleigh’s wife ! It is, indeed, a sight to make men smile.” And she laughed a bitter and scornful laugh, as though she mocked herself and all the world.

“Oh ! Gertrude. Do not speak so angrily and cruelly. Is it this poor woman’s fault that fortune has been thrust upon her ? Gladly would she make restitution, were it in her power to do so ; and right thankful would she be could she restore this wealth to you and to its rightful heir.”

“I thank her, but neither I, nor mine, will consent to receive alms from Sir Philip Thornleigh’s friend !” said Gertrude, with proud determination. And Alice, seeing that her present mood was one that rendered reasoning with her useless, was prudently silent.

Truly, when those we love disappoint us, the hit on our heart is a hard one ! Alice felt this as she leant her head upon her hand and recalled (moodily and almost resentfully) her sister’s words. Doubts were creeping in, and beliefs vanishing

away ; while testimonies which she had driven forth before as unworthy of credit, came rushing back—a perfect crowd of witnesses—to prove that Gertrude was what her sister feared to name.

It was, perhaps, strange that the fortress of faith, which had stood firm against so many rough assaults, should be crumbling away at last, reduced by the arrow of a sharply uttered word ! But the case is not a novel one ; nor is Alice the only woman who has deemed an act or thought of *meanness* to be the worst of faults, and of all others the most hard to be forgiven.

And was it a true bill that the deliberating jury in her heart had found against her unhappy sister ? And can you, O reader (magnanimous and disinterested as you doubtless are), suspend your judgment for a while, and forbear to condemn this Gertrude, faulty though she be ? Can you abstain from stigmatising her as one who could command her feelings and her temper well enough, till she found that it was not love and confidence alone, but lands and money, that Mrs. Vaughan had obtained from Philip Thornleigh ? Can you, in short, do what Alice did not, namely, think of her charitably, and with hope ?

Lady Thornleigh left the garden abruptly, after her last angry speech ; and soon after Alice was startled by the sound of carriage wheels. Looking round her, she saw their little *char-à-banc* at the door, and a minute later Gertrude entered it, and was driven away at the measured trot of the broad-backed mare who drew the old-world-looking vehicle.

On that evening, Helen sat alone in the little inn's best room at A——. It was a large and lofty chamber : two narrow beds, placed side by side under an alcove, occupied one end of it ; and at the other were three windows, having view upon the market-place. In the centre stood a white marble table ; and round the walls were heavy chairs, cushioned with time-worn Utrecht velvet. Who has not seen hundreds of such rooms ? Who has not said, on entering them, that they were of all rooms the most cheerless and unhomelike ?

Helen had wandered about her apartment till she was tired, and she had examined the engravings on the walls till she knew their small details by heart. There were bronze horses on the chimney-piece, driven by an insane-looking Apollo, with hair erect ; and of those horses she knew every vein and

muscle ; nor was there a paper rose or poppy in the gaudy flower-vases which had escaped her notice. She had been long alone, and what was to her a trying thing, had been for hours without occupation. The shades of evening were creeping on at last, and under cover of the coming twilight, she drew her chair towards the open window. There were crowds of busily idle peasants on the *place* outside ; and much of noise and merriment. Helen looked on and listened mechanically, for her thoughts were far away. She was with Philip again in that great London house, where he had bid her work for him ; and she was glad—glad in spite of loneliness and gloom—that she had taken her first step in the direction to which his dying fingers had pointed. She was absorbed in these meditations, when the door of her room was opened slowly, and a figure, treading noiselessly along the uncarpeted floor, advanced towards her. Then she turned her head, and seeing a pale face, with thin, sharply-cut features, and cold, grey eyes, looking at her fixedly, she knew at once, and by intuition, that it was Philip's widow who stood before her. There was no resemblance between that attenuated woman and the fresh, bright being whom (before the shadow had fallen on what was then the sunshine of her life) Helen had once seen ; yet, despite the great and entire change, her instinct did not, and could not, deceive her.

She rose from her chair, and the two women confronted each other. They were very different in appearance, and apparently so in age ; though, in point of fact, Lady Thornleigh was scarcely more than two years the elder. She was, however, wasted nearly to a shadow ; her cheeks were hollow, and her forehead traced with lines ; while Helen was in the full zenith of her wonderfully-preserved beauty.

Gertrude was the first to break a silence which was painfully embarrassing.

“ I beg to apologise for my intrusion,” said she, with all the haughtiness that could be thrown into civil words, “ but it appears to me advisable that Miss Ellerton should not visit this hotel at present ; and in affairs of business, there is no one in this neighbourhood who can take my place.”

Helen bowed her head humbly ; but words wherewith to answer the implied taunt, failed her.

“ I am afraid,” continued Lady Thornleigh, drawing her chair to the table, and leaning her arm upon the marble, “ I am

afraid that I must ask your permission to rest during a few minutes, for I am weak and ill.”

Helen again inclined her head, but remained silent. She gave one look at the care-worn face and figure, clad in its deepest widow’s weeds; and no feeling harder than that of pity found a place in her heart.

“You have come,” said Gertrude, coldly and calmly, “to inquire of me whether I am deserving of the name I bear.”

“Oh, no, no,” interrupted Helen; “you are mistaken, madam; believe me that you are. Pardon me, if to your sister I expressed my meaning, and described my errand wrongly. I know you have been greatly”—and she hesitated as though unwilling to proceed.

“Greatly what? Pray continue your remarks, for I am prepared to listen to painful truths.”

Her sense of the injustice done her, roused Helen, giving her courage to say, with tolerable composure:

“You speak harshly, Lady Thornleigh; but you cannot anger me, for you were his wife, and are, like myself, in deep affliction. Do you think it is for my own pleasure that I am here? And can you imagine that I would causelessly have thrust myself into your neighbourhood? Believe me that I am deeply sensible of my own unfitness for the office to which I have been appointed; and that could I have obtained elsewhere a clue wherewith to guide me, I would have followed it while life lasted, sooner than have shocked you with the sight of one whose presence must be so hateful to you.”

There was no servile cringing in Helen’s manner, humble as were her words: and Gertrude felt that a tribute, undeserved perhaps, but still a tribute worthy of acceptance, was offered to her own implied superiority.

“I presume, madam,” continued Helen, “that you have already been made acquainted with the conditions, on the fulfilment alone of which *you* can be restored to your former position, and *I* be permitted to return to poverty and obscurity. So much, at least, Miss Ellerton must have made known to you.”

Lady Thornleigh bent her head in token of assent, but turned away the countenance on which deep mortification was so plainly written.

“I take God to witness,” pursued Helen, “that in this affair I am a most unwilling agent, and that gladly would I delegate

to another the task allotted to me by Sir Philip Thornleigh. Nay, madam, do not shrink from the mention of that name, for it is one that is filling both our hearts.”

“But one that shall not be named by you within my hearing,” broke in Lady Thornleigh, whose weakened nerves were ever set a quivering when her husband’s name was uttered, and who now spoke in a voice choked by hysterical sobs. “Mrs. Vaughan—Madam—it is time that this interview should cease. I was wrong to seek it; nor know I what strange fancy seized me when I left my home to seek you here this day.”

Helen was greatly grieved at her obduracy.

“Surely,” she said, “there must be some feeling in your heart to contradict your words. Had I been a woman, insolent in my success and glorying in my wealth, you would do well to scorn me. But, with my heart full even to breaking, I have come a weary journey to devise with you or yours some means of doing justice to the wronged, and that done, why the world and you will hear of me no more.”

Lady Thornleigh was at last moved; Helen saw the change of feeling, and continued.

“It is far from my wish to prolong this interview; my purpose in coming here being merely to demand whether you will accept of my services, and assist me to promote the attainment of Sir Philip’s wishes.”

“I cannot,” faltered Gertrude.

“You cannot! Oh! Lady Thornleigh, in mercy to yourself and to your children, reflect deeply ere you do that which may so materially affect THEIR fortunes, while it must leave unsatisfied the last wish of him who is no more. Pardon me for what may seem officious in this entreaty; but I have known the bitterness of the world’s contempt, and dread it for those that Philip loved so well.”

“And have you no doubt of my truth, no fears that even if I would, I could not clear myself?”

Instead of replying, Helen could only ejaculate the words, “Poor Philip!” and then the tears filled her eyes.

Gertrude was fairly conquered by this touching evidence of genuine feeling; for no one could have spoken those two regretful words as that grieved woman had, were the heart not true and the purposes pure and unselfish.

“Forgive me,” said the remorseful lady—“forgive me for

my jealous and unworthy words. I was angry. It seemed so bitter to find one employed to pronounce upon my conduct, and measure out my punishment—”

“And that one such a thing as I am,” said Helen, meekly. “Well can I understand how hard it is to bear. But you forgive him now? He had no time—he could scarcely speak his wishes, save to one who felt for him as only a woman can feel.”

“But he died forgiving me, and believing that I had not wronged him?” asked Gertrude, in a hushed voice.

“Indeed he did, for you and his children occupied his latest thoughts; and you were all with him in spirit when he breathed his last.”

“Thank God,” said Lady Thornleigh, fervently; and for a while there was silence in the room, while the women shed healing tears to the memory of the loved and lost.

“One word,” said Gertrude, as, after a time, she removed her handkerchief from her eyes. “One word before we part. The time may come—nay, it must come, when I shall be enabled to justify myself in the world’s opinion. But that time may be yet far distant, and I must wait God’s time in patience.”

“But is there nothing in my power to effect? Is there no aid that I, by means of the riches that are yours, can render you?”

“Nothing. I am bound by my fears, and by a promise.”

“A promise rashly given, perchance, and unlawfully exacted; such a promise may not be binding.”

“That is a question which only my own conscience can decide,” said Lady Thornleigh. “In the meantime—”

“In the meantime,” exclaimed her companion, with some of her characteristic impatience, “give me, I entreat, some word, some name, connected, however remotely, with this cruel mystery, and leave the rest to me.”

“I cannot—I dare not,” said Gertrude, turning even paler than before.

“Take courage,” urged Helen, “one name is all I ask for. Stay, do not speak, but write it here,” and she placed her own small memorandum book in Gertrude’s hand.

For a moment the latter hesitated, and then, taking the pencil, traced, with trembling fingers, two words upon the page. Helen did not read them then, but, closing the book, laid it on the table beside her.

“It is well,” she said, “and I thank you for the effort you have made. Lady Thornleigh, we may never meet again; but should the time arrive when, with your boy and girl beside you, you are leading a life of happiness at dear old Thornleigh Abbey, promise me that, for the sake of one who will be poor and lonely then, you will think with mercy on the fallen; and will believe that to those who have loved much, much may, perhaps, be forgiven.”

“I promise,” said Gertrude; “and in return I ask you to be my friend.”

“A friend at heart, and for life, believe me. But there are circumstances under which even those who are bound by the closest ties of friendship, would do wisely to bid each other a lasting ‘farewell,’ and ours is a case where (of all others) such a course would be most advisable.”

“Do not say so,” said Gertrude, mournfully. “I cannot forget your generous kindness.”

“But you would remember other things which it is not in the nature of our sex to forget. Besides, you are of the world, Lady Thornleigh; and it becomes Philip’s widow, and the mother of Philip’s children, to stand as high as may be above the world’s sneers, and the world’s hard word. No, in this life we shall see each other no more. I depart to work for Philip and his children, while you remain to wait and hope.”

She looked so grandly beautiful as she spoke, that Gertrude shrank abashed into her humbler self. What was she, that Philip should have deserted that peerless creature to make one so every way inferior to her his bride? What, indeed, but that men—

“However they do praise themselves,  
Have fancies far more giddy and infirm,  
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and won,  
Than women’s are.”

Lady Thornleigh found it impossible to change the purpose of the high-hearted woman, who would only accept from her, her hand at parting, and the fervent “God bless you,” that came warm from the heart of Philip’s widow.

“May God be with you and with your children,” said Helen, as her hand (on which was a mourning ring for Thornleigh) rested for a moment in that of his long parted-from wife. “May we meet again in a world where there is neither

marrying nor giving in marriage, and where tears will be wiped from all faces. Wait and hope, Lady Thornleigh, and think kindly of me if you can.”

And so they parted. Alice loved her sister again, when she found that Gertrude did justice to the penitent woman, whose wrongs had been so much greater than her own. She did not attempt to analyse the causes which had wrought the change in her sister's feelings and opinions ; it was enough for her that Lady Thornleigh was no longer harsh and stern ; and there was consolation in the knowledge that Helen was in possession of a password which might open the secret closet where the skeleton of her sister's life was hidden.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

“Gorgeous flowrets in the sunlight shining,  
Blossoms flaunting in the eye of day,  
Tremulous leaves with soft and silver lining,  
Buds that open only to decay.  
Brilliant hopes all woven in gorgeous tissues,  
Flaunting gaily in the golden light,  
Large desires with most uncertain issues,  
Tender wishes blossoming at night.”

LONGFELLOW.

THE journey from Auray to Paris was a tedious one, and during the hours that it lasted, Helen had ample time to think over her plans and projects for the future. She had two great purposes in view, one of them being to obey Philip's last commands, and the other to benefit a class among her sex which, of all others, she pitied and mourned over. It had required but little reflection to convince her, that it was not by hiding herself in retirement, and by keeping aloof from the thronged haunts of her fellow-sinners, that either of the objects for which she desired to live, could be effected.

By mixing in society, such society at least as she could command, there was some shadow of probability that the mystery of Lady Thornleigh's life might, through her means, be elucidated. With this hope, therefore, and in furtherance of the other object which she had so greatly at heart, she determined

to fix her residence in London. Once there, manifold were the duties that she was resolved to impose on herself. Her work should be done everywhere—in the abodes of gaiety and dissipation, and, if necessary, even in the low haunts of the criminal and the abandoned. Like the wretched mendicants who, in continental cities, are seen to crawl forth in the early morning light, to search in dirt-heaps for such refuse scraps as may serve them in their need ; even so did Helen determine to be a digger for the hidden good, small though her gain might be, and sought for among the cast-out dregs of low humanity.

She had a mystery to solve, one, too, in which she little doubted that the interests of those she had sworn to serve were involved, it might be in a web of crime.

Lady Thornleigh's manifest alarm precluded all recourse to professional “detectives,” and it was therefore on her own unaided efforts that she could alone rely. Philip had not left the duty which *he* had neglected, to be performed by either unwilling or unable hands ; and the sequel of this story will show that the humble instrument he had chosen was not unworthy of his trust.

Helen's first act was to hire a house in one of the best and most fashionable streets, and to furnish it with care and taste. The “family mansion,” where a gorgeous achievement blazed forth in heraldic splendour, was never more entered by her who was now its owner ; nor did she take possession of any of the “family belongings” of the Thornleighs. Plate, jewels, library, furniture—all were hers : yet all remained as Philip left them, and, undesecrated by her touch, were guarded as sacred deposits for his widow and his children.

The world of London knew nothing of Mrs. Vaughan, save that as Philip Thornleigh's mistress, she was said to have “behaved well ;” and that, in appreciation of her conduct, and in disgust at that of his wife, he had committed the insane act of making her the heiress of his wealth. That she had schemed for this result, or acted in some unworthy fashion to arrive at it, seemed certainly more than probable ; and to that belief did those incline who were not likely to benefit by her accession to fortune. There were, however, many who took her merits upon trust, and believed her perfect, from the mere fact that she was rich.

In the spring of the year that followed on Philip's death, Helen broke through her habits of seclusion, and what is called

“opened her house” to a certain portion of the London world. It was a very agreeable society that she collected round her. Among the men were many distinguished by talent, and high in worldly position—while there were besides a few persons of rare genius, but of reserved habits, who (thawed by the genial warmth of Helen’s manner, and the unobtrusive brightness of her conversation) had been drawn from their books and their retirement to join her magic circle.

There were some women among Helen’s guests ; for she was not one of those who can endure an entire dependence for companionship on male friends and acquaintances : but although those of her own sex with whom she associated were necessarily chosen from that class against which society shuts its doors, it must not therefore be imagined that all such banished ones could find entrance within hers. There was a line drawn by Mrs. Vaughan, beyond which none could, and indeed beyond which none ever attempted to pass, for Helen acknowledged fully and unconditionally the wisdom and the justice of those long-standing social laws, by which women whose sins have been flagrant and public, are excluded from general recognition and consideration.

“Those women,” so Helen argued, “who could wish for, and aim at such recognition, are most probably the least sincere in their repentance, and the least worthy of being upheld. But there are encouragements to be given,” she would say, “and friendly visits to be paid privately and unostentatiously to those who are mourning over their sins in solitude : and such kindly upholding can hardly do an injury to the interests of society.” Impressed with this belief, she acted on it systematically, choosing her companions from among those whose early temptations might in some sort palliate their offences, and especially seeking for those who, far from boasting of and luxuriating in the consequences of their guilt, were grieving over the necessity that kept them as they were.

Were we describing an imaginary character, we would abstain from depicting Helen as having fellowship with the unfruitful workers of darkness ; while we should, instead, portray her as leading the life of a penitent recluse, far from the dangers of temptation, and equally removed from the power of succouring those who had fallen. This done (and having enlisted in her behalf the sympathies of the right thinking), we would lead our penitent gently by the hand,

laying her down at last in a peaceful grave, over which village children should strew the flowers she loved the best, while with their innocent tears they moistened the sods that lay above the breast of their benefactress.

But it was not among the just, who needed no repentance, that our sinner believed her mission lay. Among those with whose weaknesses she was acquainted, and of whose mental diseases and their possible cure she had some knowledge, she deemed it her duty to live. It may be suggested that she chose that field of duty because in it she found an excitement that was pleasant to her ; and there are some who will not be backward to remark, that the company of sinners was likely to be more congenial to a woman of Helen’s description than that of saints. There are few whose motives, as well as conduct, can bear with impunity the searching investigation of the merciless : but it is by her deeds, and by the good she effected, that this woman must be judged, and not by the preconceived notions of those by whom that judgment may be too rashly pronounced.

There was but one place of public resort frequented by Mrs. Vaughan, and that one was the Italian Opera. Her love of music was intense, and her attendance constant in the excellent box which she had engaged. She was known rather than seen to be there—for seated behind the half-drawn curtain, she indulged in her deeply felt pleasure with as much privacy as possible.

It was on a full and brilliant night at “Her Majesty’s Theatre,” that two men standing in the stalls between the acts of the “Lucia,” levelled their glasses somewhat pertinaciously at a box on the first tier, in which one lady was visible, and the presence of another was more than suspected.

The former, whose face was turned towards the stage, was a little creature—fair-haired and beautifully “got up,” with small delicate features and a dazzling skin. Of the latter, *we*, whose privilege it is to look behind the curtain, can offer a description. She was dressed in black, as, indeed, was her invariable custom ; and her only ornaments were the diamond locket suspended from her throat, and a single crimson rose in her rich dark hair. Her face had a character of calm loveliness (if we may so express it) that was singularly attractive, and had she allowed her beauty to be seen, she would have been the cynosure of many an eye that night.

Her companion was the “well-conducted,” but too tardily married wife of Lord Tiverton—an old and intimate friend of Philip Thornleigh. The pair were well-matched, for they never had what the husband called “rows ;” and they were both firmly convinced that the best philosophy of life consists in every one doing what he or she finds most agreeable. Lady Tiverton was a first-rate rider across country, “sticking to her horse,” as her lord expressed it, “better than any woman in England ;” and for that cause, if for that alone, he whose soul was in the stable would have admired and respected her.

Lord Tiverton was rarely seen at the Opera, or indeed in any place where “dress” was required, and where ladies expected him to be decorous. He hated to be what the French call *géné*, and what he called bored ; and he had moreover a fancy for putting his boots where he chose, and was sulky if (when nature within him called for a cigar) he was not able to obey her dictates. Sleepy he was at all times and places—and as, at his home and in his club, he would always indulge in the pleasant restorative of a “nap ;” he declared that it was “deuced jolly” to adhere to those sanctums where there were “no confounded women to make the agreeable to.” Such was Lord Tiverton. Maggie Brand suited him exactly ; for she had just the right number of ideas in her head, and just the proper amount of sentiment in her heart, to keep her what he called “straight,” while “Tivvy” was to her a—

“Something better than her dog, a little dearer than her horse ;”  
and she was true to him accordingly.

Lady Tiverton entertained for Mrs. Vaughan a feeling almost akin to affection. The latter amused her, while most of the women she associated with were so “boring ;” she had caught “Tivvy’s” word (the word indeed of most of the men she knew), and used it freely. She was not particularly fond of music, and on the present occasion had come to the Opera to please her friend, who did not care to be companionless at the theatre, and one of whose favourite operas had been announced for performance on the night in question.

During the first act, and while her senses were wrapt in the enjoyment of Donizetti’s most exquisite melodies, a young man had entered the box, and unobserved by its occupants, had taken up his temporary station there. He was one of the hundreds of well-dressed juvenile gentlemen who are harmless enough in

themselves, but whose increasing numbers (a supply evidently created by the demand) does not tend to raise our estimate of the dignity of the nineteenth century, in so far as its social ambitions may be taken into account. That women find such beings necessary to them is a fact, though a melancholy one. Did they not exist, who would do the dancing work—the attendance and commission work—and, alas ! sometimes the dirty work ? Who is it that repeats to the itching ears of eager listeners the scandal and gossip of the clubs? Who is it that, going from house to house, promulgates the last *on dit*, the last scrape, the last whispered surmise ? Who but the well-dressed, smooth-spoken, simpering gentlemen, who congregate round the ladies' tea-tables, and pander to their perverted tastes ?

There was no ill-nature in the individual whose name was “Freddy” Hemingsley, and who had just ambled daintily into Mrs. Vaughan’s box, for he was as obedient and nearly as innocuous as a dancing-dog. Helen rather liked him, for though pretty to look at, he was quite devoid of affectation, and though content to be silent, was ready to answer tolerably to the point the questions put to him.

Lady Tiverton never stayed late at any places of amusement. She was rather a creature of habit, and living much in the open air was apt, not only to grow sleepy betimes, but to manifest her somniferousness in a rather demonstrative fashion.

“Poor little woman !” said the dancing attendant, on his return from seeing her to her carriage. He was exhilarated by his promotion to the front of the box, and perhaps felt it appropriate to be “fast.” “Poor little woman ! I fancy Tivvy pulls her up sharp, if she stays out too late.”

“Does he ?” said Helen, smiling. “I should think it would be scarcely necessary to pull up anything so easy-going as Maggie.”

“How pretty she looked to-night,” pursued little Freddy, “so much prettier than when she’s got up to ride.”

“Do you think so ? Ah, that is because you are not a hunting man.”

“But I do hunt when I can get a mount ; only I believe I think all women prettier when they don’t try to look like men. It’s hard to keep up with the pace girls go in these days.”

“It’s the pace that kills, then, you think ?” said Mrs.

Vaughan, smiling. “And you are determined, of course, not to fall a victim to the charms of a ‘fast’ young lady?”

“Not if I can help it,” answered Freddy, with all a weak creature’s keen instinct of self-preservation. “But now, Mrs. Vaughan, don’t you think that women are bores when they’re slangy?”

“Perhaps you don’t speak the language. I have heard that it is a nice one, when thoroughly understood,” remarked Helen, ironically.

“Oh, but I do understand it,” cried Freddy, who was evidently unwilling to be thought deficient in any modern accomplishment; “my sisters talk it a little too, and I assure you they were much nicer before they learnt it. Cecilia used to be ladylike and good-natured, but now she is always making herself sick with cigarettes; while Julia almost swears at her, and tells her that she makes herself look as ugly as the deuce.”

“A pleasant picture you have drawn of your sisters. And what do you do the while? Look on and say nothing?”

“Well, I used to sing with them, but they don’t care about that now, or for playing either. They think men hate music, and are bored by quiet, accomplished girls. I do believe my sisters would do just like us at the clubs if they could.”

“It is a pitiable state of things,” said Mrs. Vaughan, condolingly. “But surely you give them good advice, and the benefit of your experience.”

“Why should I? They won’t listen to me. They think me a muff when I tell them that men hate ‘fast’ girls; and as to believing me when I say that fellows talk about and ridicule them at the clubs, why, they only laugh at me.”

“Then I don’t see what more you can do; and I fear that Miss Cecilia and Miss Julia must be left to the purchase of their own experience.”

When the conversation (if such it could be called) had reached this point, Helen, whose eyes were turned towards the stalls, remarked the two men whose double barrels were at that moment again levelled at her box. One of them she knew, while the other scarcely seemed a stranger to her. She could not recollect when or where she had seen him before; but surely that rather remarkably shaped head, with its broad massive forehead, was not strange to her.

While she was searching her memory for time and place,

she perceived an empty space where the two men had been ; and in another moment the door of the box opened and admitted them.

Mrs. Vaughan shook hands with the one she was acquainted with, and who happened to be among her especial favourites ; the latter then introduced his companion as Arthur Brandreth.

On hearing the name, Helen at once recollected it to be that of the singular individual with whom years before she had formed an acquaintance— transient indeed, but pleasant.

“ I was sure I had seen you before,” said she, holding out her hand ; “ for you are the same, and yet almost as different as two persons can be.”

“ Is it possible that you had the faintest shadow of a recollection of me ? ” asked Brandreth, seating himself beside her. “ Scarcely a man has recognised me that I have met in the streets to-day : and I have had serious thoughts of ticketing myself as ‘ Arthur Brandreth, as per invoice, by ship *Malabar*, from Madagascar.’ ”

“ But when did you come home ? ” asked Helen.

“ Home ? There is no particular spot on earth that bears that name for me. Is it home where one has most friends ? If so, mine is surely not in the British Islands.”

“ Don’t believe him, Mrs. Vaughan,” interposed his companion ; “ he has more friends than almost any one I know, to say nothing of——”

“ Johnnie Paulett ? ” interrupted Arthur. “ A very host in himself, as I can testify. I wish you could have seen his face when I sloped in at one in the morning yesterday, and offered to toss up for a pound I owed him.”

“ Yes ; and a nice-looking party you were. Just landed by ship and rail from the other side of the world ! I was just going to turn in myself, Mrs. Vaughan, when he made his appearance, and reminded me that he’d been absent a year short of the *ten* I betted him he wouldn’t stay away.”

“ And now I hope that you intend to give up your wandering life,” said Helen, “ and try if you can like us all better than you did nine years ago.”

“ Not he,” said Paulett, “ he’ll hate us all, especially the young women ; he won’t like their playing ‘ fast and loose.’ ”

“ Hush,” said Helen, “ do not prejudice him against any one. I will not allow you to be a fair judge of either persons

or things, for you have been too long an unconcerned spectator to know much of the games that are in fashion.”

“Quite right, my dear Mrs. Vaughan,” said Brandreth. “Paulett has grown severe upon the follies of the young, and has been attempting to convince me that I shall be shocked at all I see. He says that such fantastic tricks are played upon low earth, as—”

“May make the devils laugh,” added Paulett. “And by the bye, Brandreth, you saw a new animal when you came in ; new, at least, since your time,—young Hemingsley” (he was making his parting bow to Mrs. Vaughan) “must have been a boy when you left England, and now he is one of the dozens cut out of the same pattern—

“‘Fellows that can distinguish and divide  
A hair, ‘twixt south and south-west side.’

And really (for all that I can see) they can distinguish little beyond the arrangement of their outward man ; the cutting of their coats, the curling of their whiskers, and the ingenious inventions of their feminine-looking jewellery.”

“But they do little harm,” said Helen, deprecatingly. “And Freddy is a good specimen of his class. He pays his bills and goes to church, and really talks rather amusingly sometimes.”

“How well one knows the kind of man !” exclaimed Arthur. “Fellows, whose small selves are sufficient for them ; and whose blood is ‘very snow broth.’ Happy, perhaps, for them that it is so.” These words were added in a low tone, but Helen heard and noted them.

Johnnie Paulett, meantime, was examining Arthur Brandreth with curiosity. He had himself arrived at an age when the passions of many men have subsided into the “snow broth” state, so evidently envied by his friend. But, though his hair was thinned by the every-day living of some fifty years, and though his once strikingly handsome face and figure had lost something of their comeliness and symmetry, yet Johnnie’s blood had not cooled down as yet, nor had the mercury, in his temperament, sensibly fallen.

He was one of the most popular of men in a certain “set,” and that “set” was not the least agreeable to be found in the World of Pleasure. He had much wit, and was anything but shy in using it, and was blest with the high spirits which

generally make a man a welcome companion. It is true that there were careful fathers and watchful husbands who occasionally manifested symptoms of a desire to keep him at a distance ; but what cared Johnnie for such exceptions ? He had enough, and to spare, of fun and frolic ; and for more years than many men can boast he had enjoyed life to the utmost.

But now we must turn to the reverse of the picture. Johnnie had a mind and a heart, and they had been wasted ; he had great talents, and they had been misapplied ; and proud, independent feelings, which had nearly gone down in the wreck of life, never to be recovered. He had been brought up to no profession, having been cursed on his entrance into life with just so many thousands as render the choice of one not a matter of absolute necessity. Those thousands had rapidly dwindled away ; and now, with the years of half a century over his head, there remained of his small fortune but little more than was sufficient to pay the subscriptions to his clubs, and to defray his travelling expenses from the house of one “great man” to that of another.

The ruin staring him in the face had, apparently, but little effect on Johnnie’s spirits.

“At thirty he suspected himself a fool,  
Knew it at forty, and did not change his plan.”

He had never been known to say an ill-natured thing of man or woman ; and the world, who deserved censure, appreciated this forbearance in his early age. But even wit palls upon the pampered ; and good-nature grows to be called by some other name, when the power to return hospitality is not equal to the will, and when the obliged one (?) can only offer to his friends that which gold, or worth of gold, should never buy.

Helen had a true regard, and esteem, for Johnnie. With her he was his better self—the man who was meant for higher things—the true friend and judicious counsellor. There was something that was analogous in their characters which drew them together, and few were more warmly esteemed in Mrs. Vaughan’s pleasant house than the nearly wearied man of the world, whose talents and advantages had been so utterly thrown away.

“You must come and see me,” said Helen, addressing

Arthur Brandreth, as they stood waiting for her carriage to be called. “I have so much to talk about, so much to tell, that it would interest you to know.”

Arthur accepted the invitation with alacrity, and “Good nights” having been exchanged, the two friends, arm in arm, sauntered clubwards.

“What a sunny creature that is,” said Paulett, with something like a sigh. “What a misfortune it is that one never knows the right woman at the right time. Twenty years ago, if I had met with her, I might have had a chance of success, and then—why, perhaps I should not be reduced to grinning through a horse-collar for my dinner, as is the case with me now.”

“‘Some to whom Heaven in wit has been profuse,  
Want as much more to turn it into use,’ ”

muttered Brandreth. “But, my dear old fellow,” added he, “what is the use of looking back? We all have the present, and we all may have a future. You have been picking straws for years, on Life’s surface; you should have gone deeper had you wanted pearls. It is not too late to seek them now.”

“And start for Ceylon or Madagascar, eh? By Jove, I’d go there or anywhere else to make money. Could I get a pearl-fishery? what fun it would be! and I am so confoundedly tired of that painted old——”

“What a boy you are still,” said his friend, as they stood together on the steps of the T—— Club. “I wish I were as young in heart and feeling!”

The gaslight flashed upon these two faces, the one so thin and world-worn, and the other (despite his words) so full of hopeful energy; and as they stood there the pale, full moon looked calmly down upon the sleeping city. Hushed seemed its millions of human animalculæ, and gone to rest its busy multitudes; but to thousands within its precincts night brought no calm, for the wounds of sin and sorrow fester everywhere, and the physicians that are abroad are powerless to heal.

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## CHAPTER XX.

"Steadfast, serene, unmovable, the same  
Year after year, through all the silent night,  
Burns on for evermore that quenchless flame,  
Shines on that inextinguishable light!"  
LONGFELLOW.

"I BELIEVE I hate England," said Arthur Brandreth, who had been paying a long visit, and enjoying an hour's cheerful "chat" in Helen's drawing-room. "Yes, I am sure I hate England."

"Would it seem pleasanter, and would you love it better, without its faults?" asked his hostess.

"No; but its faults have grown more flagrant, and it is a changed world since I knew it."

"You are ten years older, dear Mr. Brandreth; and at five-and-thirty the change is in ourselves. Have you never in manhood returned to scenes and places that as a child you thought grand and beautiful, and felt that the grandeur and the beauty had lain in your own want of power to contrast them with other and more imposing objects? Believe me that our views of life are often equally a mistake, and that ten years ago you understood them as a child does."

"Would, then, that I had never tasted of the tree that makes men wise! But the change is not only in myself; believe me that it is not. You, and others who have lived on in this world of England, mark the difference no more than you do the gradual effects of time on the faces of those with whom you live. But years of absence have invested me with the power of drawing comparisons, and I can assure you that there are great changes for the worse, on the surface, as well as in the hidden places, of social life."

"And in what, and in whom, lies the difference? But I need not ask, for your answer will certainly be that it is in women."

"You are right, and I believe that it is partly owing to the

lamentable deterioration that I trace in them, that men have grown even harder, coarser, and more selfish than before.”

“ You are hard upon your own sex,” remonstrated Helen.

“ Not so hard as your sex is upon their own. I have heard and seen such strange things since I set foot in this evil city! The very air of it is pollution, or it could not so harden the heart and confuse the right judgment of those who belong to (what is still called by courtesy) the ‘softer sex.’ ”

“ But is it only in London; and is every woman in it forward, and foolish, and unfeeling? Surely here as elsewhere there are endless varieties of character. Surely, even here there must be some good to set against the mass of wrong and folly.”

“ Do not think me uncharitable when I say that it really seems as though the good became bad here, and the bad worse. I have been listening to Johnnie Paulett, who is a man of experience and of the world, and he declares (and, faith, I half believe him) that the hearts of women who are everything that is charitable, and kind, and gracious, among the fields and flowers of God’s blessed country, turn into very touchwood, as hollow, as worthless, and as light, when in the dust and dross of the city, that man has made! There is no pure milk of human kindness in folks’ nature here: cold water is the chief ingredient—three parts to one at least.”

“ If this be Mr. Paulett’s opinion,” said Helen, “ it is a somewhat ungrateful return for the hospitality with which he is everywhere received.”

“ Paulett is losing health and nerve,” said Brandreth, sadly. “ A man must suffer for having led an aimless, useless existence. And what, in Heaven’s name, is to become of him when he grows old? I do not mean that he has visions of the work-house fare before him, poor fellow! but he has a prospect which, on my soul! I think is worse. Day by day, when he will have lost the power to amuse them, friends will drop from him; invitations will grow fewer, and his evenings at home and alone more frequent. Even now he has not always health or spirits for the “ Club,” which will some day be almost his only resource—no wife! no children! and nothing of comfort or of satisfaction to look back upon! Such a kind-hearted, good fellow, too! It is a melancholy prospect, and one that I know it often saddens Johnnie’s own heart to dwell on.”

“ Melancholy indeed,” said Helen, “ and one on which, as you remark, our poor friend often thinks. Most ungrateful,

too, are the very persons who have benefited by his brilliant powers of conversation ; for they appear to think that by allowing him to eat and drink at their lordly boards, they have paid him for his witty sallies and his cheery talk. Ah ! who can deny the melancholy fact that there is dirt in ‘the crumbs that fall from a rich man’s table ?’ Poor Johnnie ! Do you know that I have even heard him accused of the sin of ‘lord-loving,’ and have found it impossible (except by barren and useless words) to defend him. It is so hard to hear a friend unjustly stigmatised. Johnnie, too, who of all living men sees least the difference ‘twixt Tweedledum and Tweedledee !’”

“And how amusing he is !” continued Arthur. “We both dined yesterday at the L——’s, and he said such dry, quaint things, giving point to the dull jests of others by his own happy turns of thought, and quick appreciation of the ludicrous.”

“Yes, he certainly does possess the gift of making those he amuses believe themselves to be the sayers of good things.”

“The success of a jest lying oftener in the ear of him that hears it, than in the tongue of him who makes it,” quoted Brandreth ; “but besides this happy quality, Johnnie possesses the invaluable one of either being or seeming interested in the conversation of his fellow-guests. How many of us demonstrate an impatience, at once mortifying and angering to the colloquist, who is taking his turn at the table-talk ! And how few of us even appear to consider the affairs of others as interesting to any but the expounder of them ! With Johnnie, a tender care for the feelings of his fellow-man is a constitutional gift ; one of the few that he has not suffered to rust for want of use.”

“I am glad that you find him at least unaltered, and standing firm amongst the disastrous changes and chances that you mourn over.”

“Don’t laugh at me, but listen while I tell you something of what passed at our dinner yesterday. A rather pretty girl was on my right hand. She was not shy, and for that I at first thanked her, as she chatted away to her stranger neighbour in a free, pretty kind of fashion. Her dress was peculiar, rich for an unmarried woman, but somewhat too *décolletée* for any of God’s civilised creatures. After a glass or two of champagne her spirits rose—pray do not be shocked—she was excited a little by talk, and noise, and wine ; but she was

evidently too much accustomed to the latter not to take her glass with tolerable safety.”

“Now, Mr. Brandreth, I am disappointed in you,” said Helen, “for I had thought you more charitable, and less given to evil surmises.”

“My dear Mrs. Vaughan, forgive me if I have done evil in your sight; but note well that I have mentioned no names, and that I do but quote one instance of the truth of what I hear, alas! much talked of, namely, that the hard life led by London young ladies, and the constant state of excitement in which they exist, calls for, and is in part kept up and supported by, the over-free use of pernicious stimulants. But to return to my pleasant neighbour. Young Lord Eastham was seated opposite to us, and across the table she addressed him frequently. This surprised me a little, I confess, but it was the after-dinner conversation (when in the drawing-room we both joined her) that astonished me the most. We were talking (a hackneyed subject to the others, but a new and fresh one to me) of the *habitues* of the Park. Miss —— (no name, you perceive, after your rebuke) seemed knowing about horseflesh, and cunning in equestrian lore. On a sudden she turned to me. ‘What do you think of “Croquet’s” chestnut?’ she asked. I was silent, being too much startled for speech; so the young lady rattled on. ‘And “Croquet” herself,’ she said, with a laugh, ‘do you admire her? I think her hardly pretty, and yet how men do rave about her!’ Lord Eastham laughed. ‘Ask old Stareon,’ he remarked; ‘I don’t wonder at his being spoony, for she’s an uncommon fine figure, and then she’s so awfully cheeky.’ Oh! Mrs. Vaughan, to think that our young English girls should have sunk to this! To think that they should so have lost the delicacy and sense of decorum of their sex, as to talk openly of women who——”

Helen interrupted him with a laugh.

“My dear Mr. Brandreth,” she said, “you seem to forget that you are talking to one, of whom the world, if it chose, might——”

“Might if it dared; but there are bounds to the audacity of even the world’s brazen tongue,” interrupted Arthur. “No, I did not, for I cannot forget to whom I am talking; though, perhaps, even to think of one so pure of life, while dwelling on those who flaunt their misdeeds shamelessly in the face of day, is an offence. I firmly believe that were there more women

such as you men would be less driven to the 'Croquets,' and other such light, gamesome things, for companionship. I mean, were they like you in all but——"

"Now, please not to cross the *t*'s and put the dots on the *i*'s, and so contrive to make us both uncomfortable," said Helen, with a smile. "I am much obliged for your compliment, and confess to have often thought with you, that if young ladies would be lively and talkative, without degenerating into slang—soft-hearted without being sentimental, and good without being straightlaced,—men would appreciate them more highly, and would be less often driven to associate with women of the class you speak of. But enough of this, as I have to discourse with you concerning some dear old friends of your not-forgotten past, friends who are living far from the contamination of the world, and who are, at this moment, in circumstances neither happy nor prosperous."

There was much that Brandreth heard during that lengthened conversation which was new to him. In common with all the world, he had heard reports far from favourable to Lady Thornleigh ; for the breath of scandal, subtile and penetrating as the electric fluid, steals amongst us we know not how ; and, even in the Antipodes, Arthur had heard the *on-dits* of an evil-thinking society. But of Alice no intelligence had reached him. The mild light of quiet, good deeds shines very faintly in a naughty world ; and of the lady he had loved Arthur had, therefore, heard no word. In the distant regions where he had been sojourning, the image of that fair girl had remained with him, pure and unsullied as a freshly-gathered flower. He had remembered her through weary voyages on the stormy ocean : and through sleepless nights on desert sands (while with upturned face he watched the shooting stars) ; soft eyes had looked on him as though from heaven. He had pictured her to himself as the wife of his friend, and had turned from the ideal painting with a shudder. He had endeavoured to thrust her from his memory, but she would still return—return, as he fondly hoped, to bless him with her friendship, and to stimulate him to good deeds. And now, for the first time, he heard that she was free, and not only free, but poor—in exile, and looked down upon. Arthur rejoiced at the thought. It might be wrong ; it was doubtless selfish ; but still it was deep happiness to reflect that through his means that self-devoted girl should learn what true love was, and, knowing it, should rest on his true hart for ever

He hid neither his joy nor his hopes from Helen—from Helen who already knew so much, and to whom, nine long years before, Philip Thornleigh had not hesitated to impart his conviction that Arthur loved his sister Alice.

“I shall set out for Southampton to-morrow,” said the so lately-returned traveller, “and make for the port of St. Malo. I know the line of country well, having been once already in that direction.”

“Where have you not been?” asked Helen.

“Never to Kelhouet,” answered Arthur. “And now, dear Mrs. Vaughan, wish me success and happiness, and hope for me, that after all, I may not be rushing into a ‘fool’s paradise, to few unknown.’ I should not like to fail in this, for I am too old to fall in love again.”

“And women are so different to what they were in your day,” said Helen, playfully.

“Different! Yes, in some things; but the daughters of Eve are still very fair,” responded Arthur, on whom that bright smile had, notwithstanding his love for Alice, *told* a little.

Was it Helen’s fault that so few men could resist the charm of her manner, the softness of her voice, and the pervading feminine attraction of every look and movement?

Must it be reckoned up among her sins, that having known the bliss of being loved devotedly, and—greater happiness still—of loving deeply in return, her heart should sometimes be filled momentarily with a wild yearning for passionate affection?

Women who are constituted mentally and physically as Helen was, are the most sorely tempted to evil—tempted alike by their own hearts and feelings, and by those of the other sex, who, seeing into the depths of their natures, value them for the rich wealth of love that lies buried there. Helen was far from being either ignorant of or insensible to the admiration that she read in Brandreth’s eyes. The cold of heart will blame her, and the untempted ones will condemn her for a sensation which, after all, was natural. But let her hope for pardon (even though she was sending forth her lost Philip’s friend to plead his cause with Philip’s sister), for she had begun—let us speak it lowly, for the whisper had only thrilled softly through her own heart—she had begun to feel that Brandreth’s society was a source of happiness to her, and that the loss of his daily

visits would be sorely felt. She had called herself to account for her pitiable weakness, even while Arthur told her of his love for Alice ; and had striven successfully to hide the shadow of regret that flitted across her countenance ; but when she saw that, in parting with her, he was not unmoved, a flush of pleasure rose to her temples.

Forgive her, for she is human—forgive her, for she will deeply repent of her momentary weakness, and, doing battle bravely with the enemy, will come out a conqueror at last.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

“The day drags through, though storms keep out the sun,  
And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on.

The thorns which I have reap'd are of the tree  
I planted—they have torn me, and I bleed ;  
I should have known what fruit would spring from such a seed.”

BYRON.

THERE came a day after weary waiting, when the peasant postman, in his blouse and badge, left in the spacious kitchen of Kelhouet a voluminous packet containing letters for Lady Thornleigh. The contents of that packet were important, for they told her that she was at last released from the vow of secrecy that had been exacted from her, and that she could reward her sister for her generous trust. In her own words shall Gertrude's story be told—told as it was to her who had clung to the suspected one through evil report and good report, saying, as did the tender Ruth of old, “Where thou goest, I will go, and where thou diest there I will be buried.”

“You were too young, dear Alice,” began Lady Thornleigh, “when I first left home, to remember that event. I was seventeen then ; it seems but as the age of a child to me now, but in those days I deemed myself ripe in wisdom and experience. You know that I was taken abroad by our cousins, the Sedley Mainwarings. They were young, giddy, and devoted to dissipation. Their follies came under the head of ‘a liking for

society ;' but the result of them was, that their house became the *rendezvous* of the unprincipled and reckless of all nations, who were congregated in the gay French town where we resided. I was for nearly a year the inmate of their house ; and, as you may imagine, my life, contrasted as it was with the dulness and misery at home, was agreeable enough. Alice, you do not know what the misery of that home was ! ”

“ I do know it,” said her sister, almost in a whisper, “ for I heard long ago (when I was a very little child) strange and mysterious stories about my poor father ; and can well imagine that when I was too young to note what was passing, your life at the Hall was anything but a happy one.”

“ Yes, you must have heard the talk of servants—servants, who know so much, and yet so little after all ; but you can hardly have guessed the whole frightful truth. Alice, your father was mad ! You may well shudder, and turn pale. I have never said the awful words before ; but they are a fitting beginning for a tale like mine.

“ I utter them now without flinching or disguise ; for it was not an hereditary insanity, but was caused by a blow on the head from a fall. He was sometimes hard to manage ; occasionally, however, I think he knew us all, and loved his daughters. But then there came dreadful illnesses that shook his reason, and brought him near to death. But the worst is yet to come, for our mother—Alice, I must speak it low—our mother was cruel to him, and——”

“ Hush, Gertrude ! For the love of Heaven ! Hush ! Remember she is our mother, and let me respect her if I can ! ”

“ Be it so ; and I have said enough if I have shown you how great was the cause I had to dread my home, and to long for escape from it by any means in my power. The greater number of the men by whom we were surrounded, were anything but rich ; but even if they had been more largely endowed with the gifts of fortune, it was unlikely (from their class and character) that they would have dreamt of what is called ‘offering me marriage.’ Our most constant guest was a handsome man of the name of Considine. He was not very young, being ten years at least my senior ; and full of the wisdom that is given by experience and knowledge of the world. His mother, who had been a long time dead, had been a Cuban-Spaniard. He was a papist ; and his family on his father’s side were Irish.

“ So much it was necessary to say of the descent of the man

who has exercised so fatal an influence on my life and conduct. In character, he was vain to a degree I have rarely seen equalled ; morbidly sensitive to ridicule ; and determined, even to obstinacy, when opposed. My first impression was, that he was half a savage, so wild seemed his nature, and so hot and untameable the blood that coursed through his veins. From the beginning I feared him ; but my cousin laughed at my alarm, and encouraged his daily visits. So, in time, I grew to dread him less. I was vain then, Alice, and my self-conceit was gratified by his attentions. The prospect of returning to the Hall, too, was hateful to me ; and so fearing, and not loving him, I still wished to marry Henry Considine.”

“Poor Gertrude ! I can almost understand it,” said Alice, softly.

“Try to understand it, dear, for my sake,” said Lady Thornleigh ; “and try to feel with me ; for the knowledge that you do so will give me courage to proceed. Alice, that wild, ungoverned man made love to me. You can hardly know what that sentence means, dear sister. Well, he did not ask me to marry him, not at least in the early period of our acquaintance ; but he swore he loved me, and reproached me with my coldness, calling me his ‘*Belle, mais froide Anglaise*.’ And I (to my shame be it spoken), I bore it all, in the hope that in the end he would marry me, and save me from the home I dreaded.”

There was a pause for breath, and then, encouraged by the sympathy so clearly to be read in the eyes of her listener, Lady Thornleigh continued thus :

“I was still in suspense—still hoping for the proposal that seemed hovering on Considine’s lips, when I received a letter from my mother, desiring my immediate return. There was no escape, no hope of delay or change—go I must, and that at once. It was arranged that my cousin’s French maid should accompany me to Paris, where a friend of my mother’s was to meet and escort me the rest of the way to my home. I left P—— with bitter regret, and with many tears parted from the relations who, thoughtless and injudicious as they had shown themselves, had been invariably kind and affectionate to their ill-fated cousin.

“On the evening of the first day we stopped at B——, where it was arranged that we should pass the night. It was nearly dark when I stepped from the *coupé* of the diligence, and,

judge of my dismay and affright, when (standing ready to assist me) I saw the form and face of Henry Considine. He, too, as it appeared, had left P—— that morning, having taken upon himself, as he said, to be my escort.

“I will not describe to you the scene that followed, nor repeat the arguments used by him to induce me to consent to a private marriage. It is sufficient to say that he so worked upon my fears, by pointing out the disgrace that would befall me, when the fact of his pursuit of me should transpire, that I at last agreed to his proposal. A ceremony, which I believed to be a legal one, was gone through the next morning. Considine had assured me on several occasions that he professed no particular creed of religion ; and he had more than once been seen to enter the Protestant church at P——. I saw, therefore no reason to doubt that the service, as performed by a young English clergyman who had accompanied him from P——, was a binding one, and that in the English Consul’s house we were lawfully and duly married.

The only witnesses on the occasion were Pauline, the French servant, and the English consul ; but the clergyman, who seemed to feel an interest in my fate, put into my hands ere he left a few hastily written lines, which he told me I might eventually find useful. Poor young man ! he was evidently one of those who leave their friends and homes, to die alone in a warmer but less friendly soil, for a cough hard and frequent shook his thin frame, as he pronounced the blessing on those whom he had united.

“It was the last time that that feeble sufferer was called upon to perform any of the duties of his sacred profession, for ere another month was over he lay at rest in the Protestant burial-ground of P——.

“I soon found that I had gained nothing by my ill-omened marriage ; for not only was my return to my home not prevented, but I had to bear with me the burden of a heavy secret. My husband accompanied me as far as Paris, and there exacted from me an oath, the most awful and solemn, that never during the lifetime of his mother’s brother and sister (persons whom he described as plunged in the lowest depths of bigotry) would I divulge the fact that he had married an English woman and a Protestant. I had no choice but to obey, for I was utterly at his mercy ; and so the irrevocable words were spoken, and we parted. Alice ! I never saw him again.

But I will not now dwell upon his end, and will continue my own miserable story.

“It was not long after my return home ere I found that a portion, at least, of my secret could not be for ever hidden from those about me. At first I rejoiced in my discovery, for I did not believe but that my husband would at once come to my relief when he knew of my situation. So I wrote to him a letter full of hope and of entreaty, that he would lose no time in making our marriage public. I even feigned a love I did not feel, and prayed for his presence as for a thing necessary to my happiness. The answer I received was a blow to all my highly-wrought expectations. It was written with chilling reserve, and betrayed far more concern for his own worldly prospects than of consideration either for my comfort or my character. He was greatly dependent upon his uncle and aunt (he wrote), and could not afford to throw away their regard, or his hopes of a future inheritance. ‘I must keep quiet,’ he added, ‘and conceal my situation as long as possible. In the end,’ were his concluding words, ‘we can together devise some means of keeping everything private.’ And this was the man who had sworn with such vehemence, and so many scores of times, that I was all in all to him!—that life would be worthless without me, and death with me a heaven upon earth!

“I will not pain you by describing in detail the mental and bodily sufferings I endured while dragging through the many long and weary weeks which passed ere my mother taxed me with my fault. I do not marvel now that she deemed that fault to be so far greater than the reality; nor that (as I did not dare to confide to her the whole) she believed in none of my assertions. She had never shown me much of the affection that is supposed of necessity to exist between mother and child, and from the hour of her fell discovery I verily believe she hated me. I went away alone, Alice. Well do I remember the awful night when, with no friend to help or cheer me, I lay in my narrow berth, tossed on a wild winter sea, that broke over the deck of a small French steamer. It was a long voyage that, from Southampton to St. Malo, but such was the route chosen for purposes of secrecy and concealment. In a foreign country, and in the heart of a great city, my child first saw the light; and I, its miserable mother, surrendered it at once into the hands of strangers. Years—long years have passed since then, but visions of that season of agony haunt my

memory still, and whirl me back into the past as into a heavy sea of troubles.

“Alice! the man to whom my child was given was the person Philip saw that day. It was he whose letters Philip found; he who lost me reputation, friends, and fortune!”

“But, dearest Gertrude,” said Alice, whose tearful eyes bore witness of her sympathy, “it seems to me so wonderful, so utterly incomprehensible, that you should have married Philip with this secret in your heart.”

“He was dead—but do not interrupt me or confuse the order of events. As I before assured you, I never saw Henry Considine again; his friend (Peters, as he was called) presented himself on my arrival at R——, and informed me that necessary business had compelled my husband to undertake a voyage to Cuba. He was, he said, his accredited agent, and by him would the child be cared for. Alice, you have seen that child. Born into the world in horror and grief too great for tears, and—tampered with—as I have since learned by those to whom his death would have been a gain, the wretched son of a mother most unfortunate and accursed became the thing you saw.”

A shudder shook Alice’s frame as she remembered the afflicted being whose sight had twice so shocked her, but it was a case in which words could afford no comfort: so only winding her arm closer round her sister, she signed to her to proceed.

“When I returned home my mother was again a widow; she received me with a coldness that sent a heavy chill into the heart that was longing for some word of kindness—some token of affection that could give me courage to live and suffer. Alice, to both of us our mother was ever hard, and towards me she never attempted to hide her dislike. She made no objection to my living a life of retirement and seclusion, and as she was still handsome and young-looking for her age, the world said that she purposely kept her grown-up daughters out of sight. For a time I was well pleased to remain in seclusion, for I had an object of interest in my little sister, that saved me from the danger of dwelling on my own lamentable history.”

“You were, indeed, a loving friend to me in my childhood,” said Alice, tenderly, “and well have you deserved all the affection and gratitude I have bestowed upon you.” Lady Thornleigh continued, not noticing the interruption.

“ During the years that followed, I heard occasionally from Peters, informing me that the boy lived, but was, alas ! that dreadful thing—a hopeless idiot ! A few months before Sir Philip returned from India news came that my husband was dead ; had died of fever in Havanah, and had been buried there among his own people. I cannot say that I was unhappy, but it was a shock when the fact was told me ; for now the responsibility of the unhappy child’s well-being would rest, as I thought, upon me alone. I wrote to the address given me by Peters, but could learn no news of him. Again I sought for information, but in vain ; so despairing of success, I waited for what might follow.”

“ Poor Gertrude ! What uncertainty and what misery !” exclaimed Alice.

“ Uncertainty and misery, yes. But not the kind of misery you perhaps imagine. I had no love for that child. This may seem strange to you, who have seen what mother’s love can be, and who have read in books, and received as truth, that the heart of a parent *must* yearn over her own offspring. But how could I love the child when I loathed the father—hated him as the woman can detest the man who has insulted, wronged, and deserted her ?”

“ And you said no word to Philip of all this ?” asked Alice, sorrowfully.

“ Nothing,” responded Lady Thornleigh, “ for I loved him. Nothing—for I feared my mother, and dared not break my vow. Alice, place yourself in my position if you can. By all the arts that man can use, Philip had taught me to love him. That his devotion to me was but a momentary passion, I learnt to my sorrow soon enough ; but when I married him, I believed he did not feign ; and for him, God knows, my heart beat as it had never done for man before. Is there nothing to be said for me ? And was there no fault on his side ? Why, he married me with his love for another woman brimming up within him, while I—but what need to dwell on that ? I felt how dishonourable was my deception ; and once I resolved, by revealing to him the truth, to dash the cup of happiness from my lips. But he would not listen to me. ‘Gertrude,’ he said, ‘I love you as you are. Tell me nothing of the past. Let us both bury our dead follies in oblivion.’ I was silenced ; glad, perhaps, to find my escape in the following out of his own wishes ; and thus,

with my secret undivulged, I became Philip Thornleigh's wife."

“How terrible!” cried Alice. “And what a haunting memory must have followed you by night and by day through all those years!”

“Yes; my punishment began soon enough,” responded Lady Thornleigh. “Shortly after Marie's birth I received a letter from Peters. It contained a demand for money. Ostensibly, the sum was required to defray the expenses of my poor son's support; but in the letter was a covert menace which I was not slow to understand. From that moment I knew no peace. Demand followed upon demand, and threat upon threat; till my resources were at an end, and my courage utterly exhausted. How I existed during that time seems little short of a miracle to me now, so harassed were my days, so sleepless the weary nights I passed.”

“It was indeed a living death,” said Alice; “how could you bear it?”

“As one bears all trials, dear sister, from which there is no escaping; and in time I grew almost accustomed to my cross, and to the daily and hourly presence of the skeleton in my home. The habit of concealment, too, grew at last so strong, that it was as a second nature to me; and gave me less trouble than at first. You know the terrible consequences that followed on all my guilty and most miserable deceptions; so of that I need not speak. I have had letters from Peters since we have lived here, and in the last of them he mentioned the death of Considine's uncle. One obstacle to the clearing of my reputation was thereby removed. But there were vague allusions in those letters which (did I not know the vile and deeply scheming character of the man) would have alarmed me much. This is what he wrote:—‘I have again endeavoured to ascertain the exact date of the death of Henry Considine. That he did *not* die at the time supposed is a fact, and it may become a matter of great importance to you and to your children to know when and where he breathed his last.’”

“But, Gertrude,” exclaimed Alice, interrupting her sister, “this is vital. Do not you see that he alludes to the possibility that Edgar and Marie may not——”

“May not have been born in lawful wedlock,” said Gertrude, with a calmness that was surprising. “I too was startled when I first read the words; but believe me, it is but another scheme

to obtain money ; not from me (for since he has been convinced of my inability to pay, his exactions have been far less frequent), but from my poor husband, who was then alive, and failing him, from the heir of Thornleigh.”

“And where is this evil being now ?” asked Alice, “and does he still hold over you some terrible influence ?”

“His last letter announced that he was about to sail for Australia with his helpless charge. God forgive me ! but I could almost wish that the waves might engulf him, and that I might never see or hear of him again.”

“And the poor boy ?” said Alice, in a hushed whisper.

“Were better in his grave,” answered Lady Thornleigh, solemnly. “For those to whom the Almighty has denied the gift of reason must surely be happier in a world where physical suffering is at an end ; and where a righteous Providence will doubtless make them amends for the ills that (through no fault of theirs) they have endured on earth.”

“And now,” resumed Alice, after a pause, during which she had dwelt—perhaps rather too severely—on Gertrude’s want of maternal feeling towards her afflicted son, “now, thank God, you are free to speak ; free to right yourself in the world’s opinion. How happy the thought makes me ! But, Gertrude, will you not tell me the name of the correspondent from whom you have received this anonymous packet ? Surely there need be no secrets between us now,” she added, seeing that her sister was gathering up the papers, as though she were anxious to conceal them from observation.

“I know not. The handwriting of the direction is evidently disguised, but I suspect that it is the work of Peters. The packet has been forwarded to me from Thornleigh Abbey, and in it, besides the all-important intelligence which I have communicated to you, there are letters addressed to me by my maiden name, and ‘to the care of Henry Considine’ is written on them. There is also the announcement of the death of my husband, but to whom the announcement was made it is impossible to decipher. The date is erased, and the intelligence is written in the Spanish language. The letters are dated many years back, and are from Pauline, the French maid. The first contains merely an announcement that she is established in business as a dressmaker at Hyères, and in another she asks me for my custom and recommendation.”

“And what will be your next step ?” asked Alice.

“To write at once to Mrs. Vaughan, and make her our *confidante*. Alice, I hope I am not grasping, nor seeking with undue impatience after a restoration to riches and consideration—but for all our sakes, for Philip’s, for yours——”

“Nay, surely excuses are not necessary, and Mrs. Vaughan is one that we should, and indeed must, trust unreservedly; but I cannot but wish (for what can lonely woman do when great interests are at stake?) that there were stronger judgments and clearer heads than ours to work for, and to watch over us.”

At this moment, and before Lady Thornleigh could reply, their small attendant, clad in his picturesque peasant costume, entered the room, and presented his mistress with a sealed letter. Such missives were rare at Kelhouet, and the lady of the house held the despatch a few moments in her hand before she satisfied her curiosity by opening it.

The note was written from A——, and contained the following words:—

“DEAR LADY THORNLEIGH,

“I have been eight years in the Eastern hemisphere, and like a wise man, have at last travelled back again towards the Western Star. Ask your sister if I may venture nearer still. I shall await your answer here.

“Yours truly,

“ARTHUR BRANDRETH.”

Lady Thornleigh looked at her sister as she read this short but comprehensive epistle.

“What shall I say to him, Alice? What does he mean by his allusion to the Western Star?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Alice, with a vivid blush; “I mean, very little. Only the words of a foolish song.”

“Then perhaps I may say you remember those words,” said Lady Thornleigh, a little maliciously. “Will that be enough to bring him, think you?”

“I cannot say, Gertrude; you speak in riddles.”

“Do I? Then forgive me, for I see it all now. A love nearly lost, but found again! Ah! my dear sister, let there be no more mistakes. You have given up too much for me already, and it is for me to care for your well-doing now. Brandreth’s is a heart of gold, and ever gave good counsel to his head.

With the help of both we shall tide over all our difficulties, and you, dearest, will be happy at last. Shall I say that he may come? Tell me I may write at once."

Lady Thornleigh drew her writing materials towards her, and, hearing no dissenting voice, indited her answer to Arthur Brandreth. Need we say that her summons found him ready, ay, more than ready to obey it?

Arthur came to Kelhouet, and found the lady of his love unchanged. At once they understood each other; for to persuade it is but necessary to be truthful, and in the life and heart of one at least of the lovers, there was neither act nor thought that could not with advantage be laid bare. The visit, opportune as it was unexpected, proved of considerable benefit to Lady Thornleigh, rousing her for a while to a more healthy and hopeful state of feeling. There was during its continuance little of the pastime that is called "Love-making," but the now betrothed pair were very happy in their re-union, and the Star of Hope in the horizon of their lives grew brighter from that hour.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

“Tender-hearted, touch a nettle,  
And it stings you for your pains;  
Grasp it like a man of mettle,  
And it soft as silk remains.”—AARON HILL.

“There is some soul of good in things evil,  
Would men observedly distil it out.”—SHAKESPEARE.

IN this chapter we return to Helen, and to her London life. This announcement we make advisedly and with a purpose; feeling that there may be among our readers some so morbidly watchful over the proprieties of their lives, that they would object to accompany us into the society of those among whom, as Helen believed, her duty called her.

To those careful ones we will address two questions, viz.:

Can a disease be cured unless its causes and its symptoms be ascertained? And can drowning creatures be rescued, if some are not found willing to venture in their behalf into the treacherous and dangerous element? And you, who thus hesitate to follow us, will you profess to be ignorant of the fact, that there are such beings as fallen women, wandering in the wilds of sin, and lost in the tangled thickets of vice? No, you will no more assert this, than the majority among you will dare maintain that they modestly turn away their eyes from the exciting reports of the Divorce Court Trials, and their ears from the coarse scandals of the Clubs. These things then being so, we engage you to read on fearlessly, assuring you that you have commented on, and are cognizant of, worse doings than are touched on in these our pages—pages written with the faint hope of arousing a feeling of Christian charity for those who are struggling in the deep waters of sin.

In a small lodging, some distance removed from Mrs. Vaughan's London home, lay an ailing girl, who, with the charity that “hopeth all things,” the former often visited. Rhoda Mason was one among the many sinful ones sought out by Helen in their need; for between the “good” world and the bad she was as a connecting link, and some—sick, neglected, and remorseful—called her blessed! None knew better than she how best to work for them, and in what fashion to hold the light to such poor women as (steering from the right track) had struck upon sunken rocks and hidden quicksands, and were there perishing miserably. There were those looking at them from safe places who might, perchance, have saved some, but they were afraid. A cry had gone forth to man the lifeboat, and the cry had been responded to: but, alas! the breakers were heavy, and the fierce wind set so strong against them, that few were saved from the wreck of souls. And for those that were rescued, what remained? They were cast upon an inhospitable shore, poor, and crushed, and naked; so that the lives that were saved were little better than a burthen to their possessors.

“‘Tis not enough to help the feeble up,  
But to support them after.”

And for those weak ones whose feet are set in slippery places, few are found able to give help, or are willing to speak a word in season to them that are weary.

Rhoda Mason was the daughter of a poor clergyman. She had been educated carefully, as the eldest of her father's daughters; he having intended, that after (in her turn) bestowing the advantages of learning and accomplishments on her younger sisters, she should go forth into the world as the hired instructor of other men's children.

He could not afford an expensive school, that ill-paid village pastor! He could not pay the high price which is supposed to comprise the exclusion of the “ill sheep that taint the flock;” but he did the little that he could, and he did that little for the best. And what is the result? Far away, in a wicked city, his eldest-born, the little Rhoda, whose beauty had been his pride, lies dying in a sorry lodging, the rent of which is paid by the wages of iniquity. She is panting, coughing, and breathless, with fevered hands hanging helplessly outside the coverlid; but with a warm and zealous friend leaning over and soothing her. Rhoda's alarm was excessive; she had been told that death was hovering near her, and the poor little thing was scarcely more ready to go than had she been a condemned criminal, left for execution in a Newgate cell. The face that was raised with a look of agony to Helen was beautiful, even in the great disfigurement of sickness; but its expression was almost foolish, and the perspiration streamed from it in her agony of terror.

Helen strove to lay her head upon the pillow, but the girl, feeling perhaps that she could fight Death more advantageously in a less recumbent posture, resisted obstinately; and with her long hair flowing over her neck and shoulders, sat up in her bed, rocking herself wildly to and fro.

“Rhoda, you will kill yourself,” said Mrs. Vaughan, endeavouring to throw some sternness into her voice and manner; “quiet is prescribed for you, and quiet you must have. Lie down immediately, or I must leave you.”

This threat took effect, and the girl, after an effort to control her agitation, laid her head back with a heavy sigh. There was a bouquet of choice flowers on the table near the bed, and their perfume was overpowering; yet still the patient would not allow them to be removed, and murmured when Mrs. Vaughan placed them at a greater distance.

“I love the flowers so, Mrs. Vaughan,” said the poor weak creature; “they seem like life.”

“But their breath is poison to you, dear Rhoda, lovely as

they are. Try to be still a while ; you are wearing yourself out, and undoing all the good that has been done for you. Be patient ; it is the only virtue in your power to practise now.”

“Am I dying ?” asked the sick girl, abruptly, for at last she had found courage to put the awful question into words.

“Not dying, I trust, dear ; but in great danger ; still, by God’s mercy, you may yet be spared for a while to repent, and lead a better life.”

“What shall I do ?” cried the girl, imploringly. “What can I do ? O God of Mercy, give me life ! let me once again see the flowers, and the sun, and the world ! I cannot—will not—die !”

“Rhoda, listen to me,” said Helen, solemnly ; “the will of God must be done, and to fight against it is worse than useless. Be still, and listen to what I have to say.”

And then, with the words of Revelation in her hands and on her lips, she prayed with the despairing sinner, speaking to her warningly yet hopefully. Rhoda after a while listened patiently and attentively ; nor was Helen without a hope that the Holy Words had sunk into her heart. But when her fears subsided, and hope dawned once more, then the girl refused to believe that the path to “dusty death” was opened wide before her, and that her return to enjoy existence again among her fellows was a doubtful thing.

But Rhoda did return for a season, and (her fears and her anguish evidently forgotten) made her re-appearance on horseback in the Park, within a fortnight of the time when Helen had wiped what seemed the dews of death from off her brow.

Mrs. Vaughan felt more grieved than astonished when, crossing the Park in her carriage, she saw a girl with a hectic colour in her cheeks, with teeth of dazzling whiteness, and clustered masses of golden hair, ride gaily among the idle and the dissipated in the crowded “Row.” She kissed her hand lightly to Mrs. Vaughan, as the latter passed her, and Helen, as the girl turned her horse’s head again towards Kensington, caught the careless laugh of the party as they cantered off. It was a melancholy spectacle ; for the fiat had gone forth, and Death’s bony hand was already outstretched towards the curtain that would hide the fair daughter of Sin from the eyes of men for ever, and Helen followed her sadly in her thoughts.

“Can this be the same being,” she asked herself, “who so

lately, in her abject terror, clung to me, and cried to her God for mercy? Surely the world is for some made too pleasant; for who, on a day so bright as this, with admiring eyes turned upon her, and with all the excitement of prosperous vice at her command, but would forget that there is such a prison as the narrow coffin, and such a dress as the cerements of the grave?”

In Rhoda's sick room, when the worst symptoms of her disorder were past, and she was approaching towards temporary convalescence, Mrs. Vaughan had made acquaintance with one, who from motives of compassion and from a desire (as she expressed it) “to keep up her heart,” had come to visit her sick friend. And very useful for the purpose was the joyous Irish girl, the dark-eyed, sunny-faced Katie Reilly, who brought sickly smiles to the lip of the feeble Rhoda, as she lay hovering between life and death.

“Ah! the nasty stuff,” said Katie, one day, as she put her ripe, red lips to Rhoda's medicine-glass; “sure, why do they give you such things? a ride out now would do you all the good in life; come and take the shine out of the little Arab, and send all the pill-boxes to the deuce.”

“I should like a ride,” said poor Rhoda, sighing; and she would have enlarged on the misery of confinement and the anticipated pleasure of her restoration to health, had not Mrs. Vaughan's step been at that moment heard ascending the stairs.

“Now, Katie dear, do try to talk and look respectable,” said Rhoda, pleadingly.

“Indeed and I won't,” said Katie, stoutly; “I hate respectability. But you'll be so good as just to name me to the lady when she comes in.”

Rhoda assented, and on Mrs. Vaughan's entrance, introduced the pretty Irish girl as one of her best and kindest friends. Helen shook hands with her new acquaintance cordially, and Katie was more pleased thereat than she would have cared to own.

The two met often in Rhoda's little lodging, and grew to be intimate; for Helen saw good in the cherry Hibernian, saucy little sinner though she was; and Katie herself was devoted heart and soul to her new friend, who stood so high in the estimation of her class, and at whose disposal were so many of the things that make life agreeable.

One day, shortly before Rhoda Mason was pronounced convalescent, Mrs. Vaughan, who took every opportunity of innocently amusing her, brought as a present a large book, full of engraved portraits. Katie chanced to be in the room, and together the girls turned over the pages. They would have made a pretty picture, those two heads. The one fair and fragile, with long, drooping curls ; and the other, as she sat perched on the arm of Rhoda's chair, looking so full of life, with her dark, braided hair, and fresh, rounded cheeks. Helen, who had a keen sense of the beautiful, and who was above the weakness of envying a loveliness more youthful than her own, was looking at them admiringly, when Katie suddenly exclaimed :

“Stay ! let me look at that one again—sure it's Juan—Juan Considine, or very like him. You remember him, Rhoda ? The dark little fellow that”—and glancing at Mrs. Vaughan, she stopped suddenly.

“Did you ever know a person of that name ?” asked Helen, endeavouring to speak with composure.

“Did I know him ?” answered Katie ; “faith an' I did for a short while—that is,” added she, looking a little confused.

“And can you tell me where he now is ? for I am much interested—at least, some friends of mine are interested, in knowing what has become of him.”

“Sure, it isn't much then that I can tell you,” said Katie, who had now fully recovered herself. “He was going to the West Indies, or to Australia, or somewhere else, with another man, when I saw him last. And I'm thinking he'll be never let come back, for the other fellow was as big a blackguard as you could see between this and the land's end ; and an awful fool he used to make of the poor little beggar Juan ? He didn't like going at all, he didn't, but somehow the other man made him.”

“Did you know anything of his history ?”

“Not a great deal ; but there didn't seem much he knew himself. He was half an Irishman, and his mother was a Frenchwoman ; but both father and mother had been dead years before. There seemed a mystery somewhere. Any way, he'd very little money, and so——”

“You and he said ‘good-bye,’ ” said Helen, finishing the sentence.

“Just that ; for there’s no living upon love ; and besides, I hated the sight of his friend’s ugly face. What was his name ? The friend’s, I mean ? Let me think ; A—B—C.” And she had run half through the letters of the alphabet when she cried out triumphantly, “I have it. Peters it was ; and a nice Saint of a Peter he’d make—the schroundhrel.”

On the evening of that day, Helen wrote a few lines to Lady Thornleigh, informing her of what she had heard ; for need we say that the name of Considine was one of those that Gertrude had so hurriedly inscribed in the memorandum-book at the *Lion d’Or* ? The information was but trifling, but it was sufficient (when coupled with the intelligence imparted by Lady Thornleigh) to bring Brandreth at once to London ; and he left Kelhouet, furnished with all the documents that he believed could be of service in effecting the desired object of all their hearts, namely, the clearing of Lady Thornleigh’s name from the stain that rested on it.

Arriving in London at a late hour, his first visit was of course to his club ; and there, stretched at half-length, with pipe in mouth, he enjoyed, behind the last number of “Bell,” a few of those agreeable moments that are rendered even more pleasant by force of contrast. Voices were talking near him ; but so engrossed was he in his “Study of Life,” that they were unnoticed, till a few words touching the honour of friends dear to him forcibly arrested his attention.

The speaker was a small man, well “set up,” and somewhat dapper-looking ; gentlemanlike enough too in appearance, though verging on the “military swell.” He was well known at several of the clubs ; was great at the “Ottoman,” and not very small at “Pratt’s.” Nature had made him what is called “sharp ;” and necessity having whetted the edge of her intent, Billy Wraxham (for the individual was no other than the son of poor Philip’s dangerous cousin) had often found himself able to eke out a limited income by drawing upon his own wits.

He had the kind of vanity which often makes shrewd men rise ; and in this case, “not a vanity was given in vain.” In former days, the reputation of being a good pistol-shot has been known to be a man’s safeguard from insults ; and in like manner, and in these our times, did the dreaded venom of Billy’s tongue, and the dexterity with which he was known to dart forth its poison, shield him from the punishments which

he often merited. Some few liked him, for he was an amusing companion ; and to the high in rank, and to those whose influence might benefit him, he could administer the dose of flattery right pleasingly : but there were more who hated him—hated while they feared him. At games of chance and skill he was ingenious and successful ; a fact to which many a young lad, who had suffered at his hands, could testify ; and in the selling of a *screw* no man understood the *dodges* better, or could more cleverly make over a profitless animal to an unsuspecting friend. But enough for the present of a character which, though well fitted to “point a moral,” is scarcely calculated to “adorn a tale.” His words and deeds must bear testimony against the man.

“I know where she is,” were the words that made Arthur lay down his newspaper, and listen to what might follow. “I know where she is. Loxley’s yacht put in at L’Orient, and he took a run up the country. He saw her walking with her sister, Alice Ellerton, rather a pretty girl, but ‘gone by.’”

“How disgusted she must have been at Philip’s will,” said another and an older man, one who looked just the character to *go in* for a jointure.

“Yes, her marrying again is over, I suspect. I should think she had enough of it too ; for they say there was a husband before Philip,—some foreign fellow.”

“Can’t say,” said Billy, becoming rather reserved, and then turning away from the quiet man, he continued to address the more congenial spirits around him.

“I can’t say I ever admired Lady Thornleigh. She was a fine woman, but *crumby*. No real stuff in her. And what a fool Philip was to marry her ! And as for her sister, every one knows that she was engaged to a parson, who threw her over after a few months’ kissing. Now that’s what I call an uncivil and irreligious liberty.”

At this juncture Brandreth rose, and with a voice tolerably calm, but with cheeks and lips of that deadly white that proclaims how fast the life-blood has retreated to the heart, he addressed Wraxham thus :—

“Sir, I have not the——” and he paused for a second ; for neither “honour” nor “pleasure” seemed applicable words.

“Remotest prospect of your acquaintance,” sneered Billy, who, seeing a quarrel pending, preferred taking the initiative.

“Pray, may I ask, who has done me the favour of speaking to me ?”

Arthur was now quite cool.

“Sir,” he said, “greatly as I object to the ungentlemanlike habit of speaking of ladies in the smoking-rooms of clubs, I must on this occasion pursue the subject that you have introduced in a manner so unwarrantable, and insist on an immediate explanation of, and apology for, the expressions you have used concerning ladies with whom I have the honour to be acquainted.”

At that moment, Paulett lounged with his usual *nonchalant* saunter into the room. He shook hands with Arthur, and then seeing that something was wrong, stood by him. Billy Wraxham knew Johnnie well by sight, as who did not ? But as they were of a different set, and of another generation, there was between them no acquaintance. The younger man respected him of middle age greatly, for he was the constant companion of “fine people,” and Wraxham bowed down to “fine people,” and was ready to kiss the hems and outside edges of their garments. To his dismay, he perceived the intimacy of Paulett with the man he had insulted, and looking at that man again, he began to fear that he had been guilty of a mistake. If the great staring eyes of a great club had not been upon him, it is probable that he would then and there have made overtures of peace ; not from cowardice, for, to do him justice, Billy was brave enough, but from pure “funkeyism” and a fear of making enemies of, possibly, useful friends. Seeing his hesitation, and feeling that then and there Wraxham could hardly be expected to make a sorry meal of his own words, Arthur (after a few contemptuous expressions, and a notification that his business with him was by no means over) allowed himself to be led by his friend into a more private room. There the latter listened to the angry man’s recital of what had occurred, rewarding his confidence, however, in a manner that was highly unsatisfactory to the narrator.

“Why, you’ve no case at all,” said the man of the world, “not the shadow of a case : as far as regards Lady Thornleigh you have only the word of a remarkably foolish woman (who, like all her sex, can, I dare say, lie very like truth) that she is —what she ought to be. As far as I can understand, she has no corroborating testimony, and no witnesses to bring forward. Take my advice, and say as little as you can of the matter.

You may punch the head of this snob—this vulgar fraction of a swell ; but I don't see what you'll get by it.”

“The brute !” ejaculated Arthur, emphatically. “ But surely you think he should be called to account for what he said about Miss Ellerton.”

“ And what did he say ?”

“ Why, that she was engaged to a parson, and that he kissed her.”

“ And was she engaged to a parson ?”

Truth compelled Arthur to answer in the affirmative.

“ Then of course he kissed her. There's not a parson that wouldn't,” said Johnnie, quaintly.

Arthur longed to assert that no man would venture to come so near unto his peerless lady ; but having a strong love for veracity, the tempting words remained unsaid.

“ Paulett,” he said, after a pause, during which he may have been meditating on the unpleasant probability suggested by Wraxham's remark,—“ Paulett, I wish I could convince you that we have evidence in Lady Thornleigh's favour—evidence which even you, with your terribly low estimate of women's merits, would consider, if not conclusive, at least most valuable.”

“ Possibly,” said Paulett, in a voice that contradicted the word. “ Still, my dear Arthur (forgive me for saying so), but it seems to me that you are all rather mad on this subject. Mrs. Vaughan is for ever consulting me, as to what is best to be done ; and my advice to her is, the same as to you, Let the matter drop. If she is determined not to spend Philip Thornleigh's money—in God's name let her give the income to his widow and son, and say no more about it.”

“ But they won't accept it. They refuse to be obliged to her.”

“ More fools they, and worse than fools, for a better and a kinder woman does not live. I only wish she were not so wedded to her duties—I only wish she would marry me.”

“ And won't she ?”

“ God knows, but I don't intend to ask her,” said Johnnie, rather sadly, and in a manner calculated to check further questioning.

“ You see,” said Brandreth, after a pause, “ that it will further our object to bring this fellow to book. This is one of the rare instances in which a woman must be talked of, for the

world's opinion of Lady Thornleigh can hardly be worse, and good may result from investigation.”

“Oh, if you are all determined to wash your dirty linen in public, I have nothing more to say. However, you had better consult Gatherock. Let us go to him. He's a good fellow, as lawyers go, and moreover he can't hold his tongue, a quality which by your account would seem in this case to be invaluable. But all this time, we are forgetting the *swell* in the smoking-room ; and I have no doubt he is spreading his tail like a young peacock, and looking as *cocky* as if he had made you eat dirt. I had better settle the matter with him, I suppose. You know who he is, of course ; and that being a first cousin of Philip Thornleigh's—”

“Good heavens ! I was not aware of that. Well, I suppose I've made a fool of myself.”

“As every man does who is in love, and who, consequently, hasn't his senses exactly in his own possession. But leave it all to me. I'll settle it to-morrow ; and now I must say, ‘Good-night,’ old fellow, for I'm not as young as I was ; and, if I don't go home now, I shall be as seedy as the deuce to-morrow.”

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

“There where neighbour brows scarred by the brunts  
Of strife, and sorrowing—where Care has set  
Her crooked autograph, and marred the jet  
Of glossy locks, with hollow eyes forlorn.”—HOOD.

ANOTHER backward glance, another mental flight, but farther away, and southward, to the great port of all nations, the rich and busy city of Marseilles.

A few years prior to the date to which we have brought our story, a young Englishman might have been seen, night after night, and day after day, in a certain café of tolerably good repute, to which foreigners from almost every part of the

known world were wont to resort. It was a noisy place, with a showy *dame du comptoir*, who looked five-and-twenty, when viewed from a distance, but whose charms, on a nearer inspection, were rarely complimented save by those *habitués* whose scores were longer than their purses. A goodly number of circular marble tables were spread about, and few of these at the hour (ten o'clock at night) when we introduce our readers to the scene, were without their temporary owners. A jabbering of tongues, mixing together in a Babel-like confusion, was everywhere resounding, and except those accustomed to the din, it would seem an almost impossible thing to concentrate the attention on individual concerns, either of interest or pleasure. Still, it was evident that the task, though difficult, was not unfrequently performed, for some among the company were entirely engrossed with the journals of the day, while others—and of this number was the young Englishman above referred to—were devoting themselves to the lively recreation of dominoes.

He had nothing in his appearance, that dark-complexioned, long-haired youth, that could reveal his origin ; not one Saxon lineament in his sallow, handsome face, nor one intonation of his soft Provençal French. His name was Juan Considine, and he was the grandson of the old recluse who, in his selfish valetudinarianism, had delegated to others the duties which God and nature had imposed upon him. Juan's father, as it may be remembered, lay buried in a wild Western prairie, where the hoofs of the hunted buffalo, thundering past, shook the ground over the English dust that lay mouldering beneath.

The orphan boy had been adopted by one of his mother's relations, a kind hearted and childless man, who was supposed to have amassed some wealth during a lengthened mercantile career. Juan was known to be the old man's heir, and, as such, was *choyé* by the merchant world of Marseilles, and, to a certain extent, trusted by its tradespeople. There was much that was engaging in his character ; the very weakness and love of dependence of which, gained him some friends among those who appreciate power, and luxuriate in a sense of real or fancied superiority. He was gentle and affectionate ; content to lead an idle aimless life, and never rebelling against the mild authority of his self-constituted guardian.

Let us look at him, as, seated by one of the marble tables,

he leans over the game. One hand is thrust through his dark curls, and with the other he fingers the pieces before him, as if irresolute. It seems an undue amount of concentrated and anxious attention to be bestowed upon a game which we in England are apt to consider as almost childish in its simplicity ; but Juan, in common with many a confirmed domino-player, would pity us for our ignorance, and probably offer to show us an undreamt-of wealth of ingenuity lying hid in the small black dots which, almost from our infancy, we have despised.

Juan's antagonist was a hard, weather-beaten looking man, with a good, honest face, and small gold earrings in his large red ears. He was a “sea captain,” one who had braved the ocean storms for nearly two-thirds of a century, and whose most valued pleasure it was to handle those bits of ivory, while from time to time he indulged in remarks more *piquant* than refined, and winked without any apparent motive, but evidently greatly to his own satisfaction, at the presiding female genius of the place.

A tall man, strongly built, and who might be about fifty years of age, was leaning over Juan's chair. Unknown to the unsuspecting captain, this apparently unconcerned spectator had taken a partial glance at the pieces ranged before Juan's opponent, and just as the young Englishman, having apparently made up his mind, touched one of his own dominoes, the stout, tall man slightly pushed the boy's shoulder significantly. Juan looked up at his prompter's face (a proof that he was as yet inexperienced in the vile tricks of gamblers), and as he did so, a smothered curse broke from the tall man's lips. The execration, muffled as it was, did not escape unheard ; nor could that as yet almost ingenuous boy fail to see the diabolical cunning which gleamed over the utterer's face. Juan noticed, but made no sign ; only his play was not changed, and the game was lost.

The name of the man who leant over Juan's chair was Peters. What his birth or parentage were he could not himself have told. The voice of common report (and it is a voice in which some amount of truth can generally be discovered) asserted that Peters was the natural son of a rich English knight, a Sir Peter Holt, who while sojourning abroad, nominally for his health, had become enamoured of an opera dancer, and that the Peters of this story was the result of their tem-

porary *liaison*. His earliest recollection carried him back to a peasant's cottage, where a foster-mother alternately coaxed and bullied him ; and from thence he could have told, first, of his removal to a French school, and then to the house of an English merchant, where he was received as a very junior clerk. He was a boy of quick intelligence, and, as years converted him into a man, it became evident that he was cursed with more than one powerful passion. Of these, the most indomitable of all was his love of money. To have an unlimited command of the wealth which would enable him to gratify his expensive tastes, became, even at the early age of twenty, a yearning that was almost a disease ; and it was not long before fortune put in his way a means by which he hoped to obtain his ends. He was lucky enough (at least so he deemed himself) to discover one day, and by the merest accident, a secret, the knowledge of which gave him power. A brother clerk, whose relations stood high in public opinion, having found himself in pecuniary difficulties, had had recourse to a fraud, and had escaped detection as by a miracle. One eye alone had seen the deed (perhaps repented of as soon as done) ; and from that moment the silence of Peters was only to be purchased by money.

It is a vile calling, that of trading on the fears and susceptibilities of the weak and of the guilty. In England it is not a common one, but in France many a shrewd, low-class villain exercises it successfully. Peters wanted but a small leverage to raise him to the position in which, by his own acuteness, he would stand a good chance of becoming a wealthy man. Many circumstances were in his favour. He was good-looking, with one of those pleasant countenances which give the lie to physiognomical theories, for most of those who were introduced to Peters felt inclined to say, “ What a good fellow that must be ! ” His manners, too, though wanting in polish, were far from uningratiating, and he possessed the quality by which influence over the minds of others is obtained. Through life he had been what is called, when the man is unfortunate, an *adventurer*—a dabbler in many schemes, and a speculator in endless ventures. His acquaintance with Henry Considine dated from the early manhood of both. Together they had worked in the harness of iniquity, and together dragged the galling chain that shackles those on whose consciences lies the weight of undiscovered crimes.

It was owing to the quick instincts and great natural tact of Peters that the various offences against society, of which both had been guilty, remained undiscovered, for Henry was of a weak and undecided character, and the taint of hypochondriacism was in the blood of all the Considines, a curse that had been bequeathed by father to son, and from generation to generation.

Every event of Considine's life was known to Peters ; only on the occasion of the secret marriage with Gertrude Mainwaring did the bridegroom on that memorable occasion act independently of his ordinary adviser.

Peters was absent from Pau (one of their frequent places of resort) during Gertrude's visit to that town, and on his return he was apprised by Considine of the step he had taken. It was by Peters, as we have already learnt, that Gertrude's unfortunate child was taken possession of after her confinement—and by Peters that her after-life was made one of continual torture.

The idiot boy, of whose future importance as the possible heir of his grandfather's wealth Peters was well aware, was never lost sight of by the latter. Society was told that the child was an orphan, and the son of a sister whom he had dearly loved ; and as Peters took the child into his own house, where it was carefully attended to, the voice of public opinion pronounced the supposed uncle to be worthy of high commendation for his disinterested benevolence.

It was in London that Lady Thornleigh first saw the son from whom she had been so early parted. He was then about ten years of age, and had been brought by his guardian to a small and disreputable lodging in the heart of the City, to which place Gertrude was, one dark, foggy day, summoned by her tormentor.

To describe the wretched woman's feelings, as, stepping from a street cab, she ascended the narrow, creaking stairs, slippery with the accumulated grease and dirt of many a year, and of the passing footsteps of some dozen unwashed families, would be impossible. She was wholly unprepared for the sight that met her eyes, when the door in the second story, at which she rang, opened, and she stood in the presence of her child. She had been told that he was weak in intellect ; but when she saw standing in the middle of the room a broad, bloated creature, dressed in female costume, and with a large pinafore tied up to his throat, a shudder shook her frame, for she knew that he was an idiot !

Peters was without mercy. The room was nearly dark, though it was midday, for the dense Thames fog was everywhere ; but the man, careless of her feelings, struck a match, and the light from two candles revealed the whole horror of the scene. Full upon Gertrude's pale but handsome face it shone—on the eyes that were turned away in horror from her first-born, and on the trembling lips that strove in vain to speak. They may talk of maternal instinct, and of a love which is all the stronger for the child that is afflicted of God and an object of disgust to man ; but in such cases the forlorn one must be the offspring of one beloved, and have been itself the object of the mother's devoted care. Gertrude, as she herself had truly said, felt no affection for the child of Henry Considine, and therefore her words, when they did come, were only the cold ones of—

“Why did you bring him here ?”

“To see his mother,” answered Peters, with a disagreeable smile ; “to see his mother, and to show your ladyship what a heavy charge he is in every way.”

“But I have nothing to give you,” said Gertrude, wringing her hands despairingly, and shrinking back in affright from the unfortunate creature who was trying to lay hold of her dress, and pushing against her with unpleasant force. “I have nothing to give you. Oh ! hold him !” she cried in horror. “Don't let him come so near me ! This is too dreadful !”

“He is not a pleasant companion, certainly,” said Peters, as with a jerk he pushed the boy backwards ; “and your ladyship owes me something for acting a father's part towards him.”

“But I have nothing,” repeated Gertrude ; “I take God to witness that I have given you the last farthing I possess.”

“Nothing ?” resumed her companion, after a short pause—and then added coarsely, “I don't know what you call ‘nothing.’ You have your beauty, and I am willing to take that in payment this time ;” and he made a movement towards her.

Lady Thornleigh rose from the chair on which she had thrown herself, and despair lent her a momentary courage.

“You have brought me here to insult me,” she exclaimed, and the panting of her bosom was evident beneath the costly cashmere that she wore. “Rather than endure your insolence, I will reveal all. I will appeal to my husband, and,” she added with vindictive hate, “he will kill you !”

“I will have something for my life first, however,” cried

Peters, with a look that was a compound of many an evil passion ; “ I will have his wife’s kisses, as I have had his own gold. Did you think, poor fool, that it was only for money that I brought you here to-day ? Do you think that I am a man who can see your dainty English beauty unmoved ? Why, if you had had your eyes open, you would have seen in the Thornleigh woods that I had vowed you should be mine. I didn’t speak the words, but waited for the opportunity that has come at last. Come, don’t be absurd. I am better as a friend than as an enemy, and we are quite alone. The secret shall be well kept—not the only one between us, eh ? ”

He came nearer as he spoke, and ere Lady Thornleigh could arrest the movement, his arm was round her waist, and he had drawn her towards him. Gertrude struggled violently to free herself, and a wild scream broke from her lips. Peters laid his hand upon her mouth, for, as he well knew, the house was full of lodgers, some of whom, hearing the tumult, might rush to the rescue. It was a fearful moment to the weak and easily overcome woman, whose strength and nerves were so little fitted for the unequal contest ; but succour came, and that from an unexpected quarter. A deadly faintness, caused partly by the pressure on her mouth, was creeping over the unfortunate Gertrude, when a sudden blaze of light burst out, and the instinct of self-preservation was never more keenly felt by Peters (whose physical courage was not of a high order) than when, looking round, he perceived that the sofa and muslin curtains were on fire !

In a moment, Gertrude, conscious that she at least was saved, rushed to the door, and then descending the stairs as rapidly as her strength permitted, found herself, to her intense delight, outside the house. She had no thought, as she threw herself into the cab that waited for her, of the son whose insane fancy (by inducing him, unobserved by the other actors in the scene, to let loose the devouring element) had saved the honour of the mother who detested him ; and when on the following morning she read in the newspapers that a fire had broken out in the second story of a house in D—— Street, a fire which “ might have been attended with loss of life,” she laid down the paper with a sigh which could hardly be called one of relief.

From that time Peters and Lady Thornleigh met occasionally, but as may readily be supposed, the latter was on her

guard as to where those meetings were held. The scheming but specious *chevalier d'industrie* continued to live principally in the South of France, where young Juan Considine, the first cousin, although he knew it not, of Gertrude's son, had become an object of interest to him. In pursuance of his usual system he had at first endeavoured to entangle the boy in some act of dishonesty which would place him irremediably in his power, but he failed in this, failed from the moment when Juan, suspecting him of a sharper's trick, recoiled from him in disgust.

Not many weeks after that occurrence Juan's aged relation died, leaving the boy his heir. The sum he inherited was not a large one, some twenty thousand francs at most ; but to the legatee it seemed inexhaustible, and, impressed with a sense of its importance, he began to entertain vague and floating projects of enjoying his pleasure alone, and without the coercion of his Mentor, Peters. Fully aware was he that the latter would be unwilling to allow him any independence of action, and therefore taking advantage of the temporary absence of the man he had learned to dread, he, without making his movements known to anyone, departed suddenly for England.

It is not necessary to follow him through his travels, nor to depict his adventures in that portion of the “world” of London which is open to the young, the rich, and the well looking. Suffice it, that while spending the small fortune which he had rescued from the rapacity of Peters, he made the acquaintance of the Katie Reilly by whose instrumentality Mrs. Vaughan first heard of his existence. That was indeed a joyous time for the emancipated youth : for Katie's rule was very mild and pleasant, and poor Juan, who, from nature and habit, was ill fitted to assume the command of his own little vessel, found it far more agreeable to be steered on his course by the bright Irish girl, than by the coarse, tyrannical man who would hardly let him call his soul his own.

When Peters at last succeeded in tracing his former pupil, he was startled to find in how great a degree he had emancipated himself from his control. Katie was in very truth causing his money to fly ; not that she was either more selfish or more extravagant than others of her class or kind, for she did but follow her instincts in making the best use of her own beauty and of Juan's money. She was rather sorry, too, for

she was not quite heartless, when one day she found his purse nearly empty, and that months were wanting to the time when the half-yearly instalment of Juan's pitiful allowance of two hundred pounds per annum would become due.

Then it was that Peters stepped in, apparently to the rescue. He had seen Juan's grandfather (this was the tale he told), and though the old man's failing health and nerves would not allow him to see his grandson, he was willing to help him both with money and with interest. There was land in Canada which might one day be his, and the property required supervision, and the eye of one interested in its well-doing. That he had fixed upon one so inexperienced as Juan for a purpose so important, might have convinced the least suspicious observer that the old man had been grossly misled by Peters : also, it was evident to young Considine that, for reasons of his own, that individual was desirous to exile him from England, and from the house of his father's father. With this conviction strongly impressed upon him, he determined to keep a watchful eye around, and, while seeming to agree to Peters's proposal, he resolved to follow his own plans, independently and alone.

Katie shed a tear or two when she heard from Juan that his route for the New World had come, and that he must bid her farewell, perhaps for ever.

“Bother the distance,” said she, with a smile through her tears : “find a lump of gold, and bring it home like a good boy.”

“But Katie, what do you say to coming with me ? It is a great country, and I shall be rich there, and happy with you—but with that wretch Peters——”

“The thief of the world !” exclaimed Katie, energetically (she could be quite English in her talk when she chose, but her Hibernicisms amused her friends, and so the use of them had become a habit with her) ; “but sure what's the man to you, *agra* ? He's not your father, nor your uncle, nor no near friend, is he, at all ?”

“Friend ? curse him, he's the worst enemy that ever a fellow had. But, Katie, think of the long voyage, and you at home ; and then the strange country, and no friend in it when I arrive there.”

“Find the money, boy, and then, my word, but you'll have friends enough.”

And with this characteristic bit of philosophy, but with no word of promised constancy on her lips, the light-hearted girl received the parting embrace of her desponding lover.

But after all, Juan Considine did not go across the wide Atlantic. Arrived at Liverpool, and wandering along its magnificent quays, he met with one who knew him, and who, seeing him there alone, kindly invited him to his house. A rich and respectable merchant was Mr. Mansell ; one, too, whose trade had at various periods led him to all the corners of the earth ; and amongst those corners to the thriving city of Marseilles. He had taken a liking to young Considine in the days when the latter was little more than a child, for there was an arch joyousness in his Southern face that charmed the grave and silent Englishman ; and now that several years had elapsed since their last meeting, it gave him pleasure to see the handsome boy again.

When Mr. Mansell learnt that Juan was about to proceed to Canada on a mission requiring the experience of an older man, and the business habits of one early trained to commercial enterprise, he scouted the idea as ridiculous.

“Was that almost beardless boy,” he asked himself, “a fitting antagonist to pit against men of ripe years, whose intellects were sharpened by rubbing against sharper ones ; and whose previous knowledge of the country, and how to deal with its resources, gave them so great an advantage over him ?” No, an effort must be made to divert the purpose of the elder Considine, which could (as in strong terms the merchant wrote to him) end but in the ruin of his grandson, and in the great deterioration of his property.

To this letter Mr. Mansell received no answer. He was a man of some pride and testiness, and being angered at the little respect shown to his interference, he proposed other plans to his young acquaintance. Of these, the one that gained most favour in Juan’s sight was a proposition that he should become a clerk in the merchant’s firm of which Mr. Mansell was a partner. The latter was a shrewd, and in ordinary matters a far-seeing individual ; but he did not suspect the reason that caused Juan to accept with such alacrity the humble post assigned him ; nor was it till months had passed away that he learnt from the young man himself, how strong was the attraction that drew him towards the merchant’s house.

In that house were three young ladies, the daughters of its

owner, and the supposed co-heiresses of his wealth. The second girl (who was about nineteen) became the object of fervent love to Juan Considine, and with all the demonstrative flow of meridian feeling, the existence of that love was soon no secret to her who had inspired it. She was rather of a peculiar character, that Margaret Mansell, very still and gentle in her outward seeming, and yet with a power of devoting herself exclusively to another, which is rarely met with in one so young and so untried.

How Juan saw through the veil that hid that secret fire, we leave to those to guess who are skilled in the lore of mysterious influences, and who comprehend the principles of involuntary attraction. It is enough to say that when Juan asked for the hand of the gentle Margaret, it was refused with peremptory decision by her father, and that then (for prudence is not the virtue of the young, and especially of lovers) they in rash haste, and despairing of softening the heart of her parent, left the great city together, and became man and wife before the altar.

Juan was a Roman Catholic, and it was therefore necessary that the marriage ceremony should be repeated according to the forms of his creed. This was done as speedily as possible, and, with their finances much reduced by the various expenses attendant on marriage fees and their hurried journey, the newly-married pair arrived in London.

They were not discouraged by the prospect before them, for they were young and of good courage, and their love and trust in each other were strong ; besides, had not they two hundred pounds a-year ? and was not her father human ? Surely there was no parent but what would relent in time, and (as Margaret asserted to herself) “Juan was so good, so engaging, who could choose but love him ?” Poor girl ! she reasoned as the hopeful do, and also as those who have never known how bitter are the feelings engendered by a difference of religious creed ! What mattered it that Juan was a true man, with a sweet and unselfish temper, and that he loved his young wife dearly ? He was a “Papist,” and that was sufficient (now that young Considine was the husband of his daughter) to harden Mr. Mansell’s heart against him. There are some who trust that to those who strive to do their duty, the endeavour (irrespective of creed) may be counted for righteousness ; but, alas ! no such genial belief softened the heart of the narrow-minded man, who, looking upon a “Romanist” as on one pre-doomed to

eternal punishment, resisted every attempt at reconciliation with the daughter who had linked herself to the enemy.

The ideas of economy entertained by both Juan and Margaret were such as might have been expected from their utter inexperience. The latter's wants and luxuries had been provided for her from her infancy, and she had yet to learn that on an income of two hundred pounds per annum two servants are almost two too many, and that of those things which she had been wont to consider as among the necessaries of life, many must henceforth be dispensed with.

Very painful was the process by which experience came to that thriftless, trusting pair, and when it was gained, what then? Why, the wisdom came too late! See them in their two-roomed attic, changed, spiritless, and forlorn. They are three now, for in the cradle is a pale-faced infant on whom the mother has striven to bestow some small outward adornment. Juan is writing at a table; he is copying manuscripts for the press, but the hand that holds the pen is thin and weak, and in his face there is the worn look which long-continued and gnawing anxiety alone can give. Margaret, of the two, is the least altered, for she is supported by her great love for Juan, and for the child that he had given her. Ever and anon she steals a look at her husband, and once she asks him if she may be allowed to help him in his labours. Juan answers her by a quick, impatient gesture. It is not that he loves her less, but his warm temper has been that day soured by disappointment, and the fermentation works fretfully within him.

Margaret was ignorant of the last blow that had been dealt them. She did not know that scarce twelve hours before old Considine had, at the instigation of his Jesuit adviser, refused all aid to the grandson who had at last sought for pecuniary assistance at his hands. The same spirit of intolerance was at work at L—— that had separated (as it seemed for ever) the hearts of those whom nature meant should dwell in unity, and so it was that, with only their little son to cheer them, those children of wealthy parents dragged on their lives in poverty, with the fear of still greater destitution staring them in the face.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

"Thus from the time we first began to know,  
We live and learn, but not the wiser grow."  
JOHN POMFRET.

"HELEN," said Arthur Brandreth, when late one night he rushed into the small drawing-room in W—— Crescent, "come and be a good Samaritan, a better Samaritan than even you have ever been before."

Mrs. Vaughan laid down the book she was reading, and looked up in surprise at his anxious countenance.

"What is the matter? and where have you come from?" she asked.

"Death is the matter, and I have come from B——k Street."

"From Katie Reilly's, and brought away such a face as that? Impossible!"

"Most possible; for there is very tragical mirth at Katie's house to-night. Helen! there is a girl there who is as surely dying as I stand before you a living man this night."

"Good God! Who is it? Surely not Rhoda Mason?"

"The very same," replied Brandreth.

"But I have heard nothing of her illness."

"Likely enough; nevertheless, there she is, sitting amongst those laughing men and women, with a bewildered stare and a gray, livid face, shocking to behold. I tried to make Katie see the horror of the sight, but she was in wild spirits, and would not listen to me."

By the time he had finished speaking, Helen, who had rung the bell for her evening mantle, was ready to accompany him.

"Poor, unhappy girl," said she, as they drove rapidly from the door; "and I who fancied her recovered, and ceased to inquire after her! And Katie, too, I am disappointed in her, for I had fancied she had some heart."

“And so she has ; she is as kind a girl as ever lived when she is not in a state of inebriation.”

“Inebriation ! Good heavens, Arthur, how shocking !”

“Very shocking, but very true. Helen, they are all drunk at the house I supped at to-night, all except Rhoda. Not drunk with wine or alcohol ; but those are not the only noxious enemies that steal away women’s brains. They are drunk with excitement,—long-continued, death-giving excitement, which is as sure a poison to soul and body as the deadliest drug that ever issued from a gin-palace.”

“But did Rhoda come alone there ?” asked Mrs. Vaughan, after a sorrowful pause.

“Not alone ; but she is neglected and forgotten as thoroughly as though she were the most solitary being that ever mourned her sins in the unpopular raiment of dust and ashes. Lorton was growing tired of her weeks ago, and now he calls her illness ‘sulks.’ Helen, if women did but know in time how slight is their hold on men who don’t and can’t respect them, what a world of good it might do to the weaker sisters.”

“Yes ; I sometimes think that if one were to rise, and reveal to them the experience of a sick-bed and a neglected home, some would perhaps repent.”

“I doubt it, for no woman in the full zenith of beauty and of success can realize the disgust and weariness felt and shown by most men, when the bloom fades, the spirits flag, and the bones begin to show themselves.”

“And with those poor creatures the change begins so early !”

“Early, indeed ! But here we are in B——k Street at last, and there are still lights in the windows. Let us lose no time —I will follow you.”

Helen, despite her strong-nerved self possession, ascended the stairs with a beating heart. She had never been present at a *réunion* of the kind into which she was about to penetrate ; and at the last moment, her courage almost failing her, she stepped back and requested her companion to enter first and herald her approach.

It was a brilliant scene that presented itself to his view, with lights in profusion reflecting the bright gems that sparkled on white necks and arms, and brighter eyes kindling with the varied excitement of the hour. The supper was composed both of the dainty dishes that ladies love, and of the more stimulating viands that, towards the small hours,

men turn to with an appetite too sated for the enjoyment of simpler food. The china and the plate, the servants, and the furniture of the apartment, all spoke of Katie's popularity and success.

Brandreth was received with acclamations.

“What a bore you went away,” cried Freddy Hemingsley, who was one of the party; “Katie's been such fun! Told us all about Priest Molloy being left for dead, and three doctors sent for! How was it, Katie? Tell Arthur about the Priest.”

“Bother the Priest,” cried the irreverent hostess; “Arthur, approach—

“Come and partake our humble beer;” ”

and Katie, whose memory was curiously stored with scraps of poetry and quaint quotations, poured out a glass of “Bass” (for like a strong-minded young woman as she was, she abjured the nectar of her class), and held it in a lively fashion towards Brandreth.

“In a moment,” said Arthur; “but be quiet for an instant, there's a good girl. I am not alone; I have brought a lady with me.”

“A lady,” said Katie demurely, while they all laughed. “Not Lady X——, is it, come to sell her screw? She won't drive it into me. I would not take a present of him. Curby hocks, upright pasterns, and has carried a cantering lady of rank five years;—won't do;” and resting her rounded elbows on the table, she buried her chin in her jewelled hands and looked the picture of resolution.

At that moment Mrs. Vaughan, calm and self-possessed, and with a something in her air which quelled all approach to ribald mirth, entered the room and stood amongst them.

Katie, chameleon-like, and with all the quickness peculiar to her nation, changed her demeanour in an instant.

“Mrs. Vaughan,” she exclaimed, “how good of you to come!” and she was proceeding to heap cordialities on her unexpected guest, when a scream, so fearful that those who heard it never forgot it to their dying day, thrilled through the apartment. Then the women shrieked, and for a moment even strong men stood still, though in their hearts almost all were bent on an immediate escape from a scene which bid fair to be a shocking one.

By the side of the unhappy Rhoda, from whose lips that scream had issued, and who was now writhing in horrible convulsions, knelt the helpful Helen; while Katie, pale as death, was busying herself in loosening the strings that confined the person of the sufferer, and in sprinkling cold water on her distorted face. One man had rushed for a doctor, and poor Rhoda's faithless lover was assisting the frantic efforts of a dark, low-browed, but rather handsome girl, to free herself from the grasp which Rhoda (in what seemed a death-struggle) had fastened on her garments.

In a few minutes the room was cleared—cleared at least of all but the two who were devoting themselves to the blessed woman's work of charity and mercy.

The doctor, who speedily arrived, examined the case, and then, looking very grave, prescribed for it.

“There is no telling exactly how and when this will end,” he said, as his hand rapidly traced the ordinance which was to bring physic from the nearest chemist's.

“There will probably be a succession of these attacks, and then——”

“What?” asked Helen. “Pray state your opinion openly—it is better to know the worst at once.”

“Probably the chances lie between death or madness,” replied the doctor; “but I will see her in the morning, when I shall be able better to form an opinion on the case. In the meantime she must have good attendance and an able-bodied nurse. In my opinion, she will, in all probability, require to be placed in an asylum.”

“Ah, now, doctor,” said Katie, “don't be saying you'd have her in those dreadful places. The poor thing will come to. Sure Rhoda, you know me now,” she added, addressing the unconscious girl. “It's Katie, darling! Katie Reilly. Ah, heavens, not a bit she knows me at all,” sighed the warm-hearted creature, as she mournfully noticed the fixed stare in her friend's glassy eyes, and felt how small was the chance of her recovery.

“I fear that the doctor is right,” said Helen, gently; “and if you find your patient no better to-morrow, sir,” added she, again turning to the man of medicine, “we may have to consult you on the best method of placing this poor girl where she may have more efficient aid than we can give her.”

“In the meantime,” said the doctor, as he took up his hat

and closed his fingers on his fee, “I will send you a person who understands the management of these cases. She will be here in twenty minutes,” added he (looking at the massive time-piece—the death-watch whose tick had often made a melancholy accompaniment to the falling sands of a human life), “and to-morrow, at nine, I will visit you again.” And with that he said “Good night.”

Truly it was a mockery of the words, for the night was an awful one to all. Rhoda lay upon the bed with meaningless eyes and gaping mouth—an awful spectacle! But ever and anon she sprang with terrible suddenness from her recumbent position, and glaring upon her attendants wildly, uttered shrieks that seemed to congeal the blood within their veins.

When morning came the necessity for removing her to the asylum was painfully evident, and to the Hospital of St. Luke’s was the demented creature (with every care and attention that money could procure) promptly conveyed: thither Helen, with unwearying kindness, accompanied her, returning to watch over her at all times and seasons when the rules of the establishment did not forbid the attendance of strangers.

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## CHAPTER XXV

“Le bien ne se fait jamais mieux que lorsqu'il opère lentement.”  
DE MOY.

ON the third day after Rhoda’s admittance within St. Luke’s Hospital, the head physician, at Mrs. Vaughan’s request, called upon her at her own house. He had passed the prime of life, and was a thinking, serious man; one, too, who had brought great talents and vast instruction to bear upon the noble profession he had chosen.

“I fear,” he said, after shaking hands warmly with Helen,

“that the report I have to give will disappoint you ; the attacks are perhaps a little less frequent, but that is all. Her recovery is hopeless, for the lungs are extensively diseased, and her death, at the latest, cannot be many months delayed.”

“Anything is preferable to insanity,” said Helen, with a shudder—“any death, any amount of bodily suffering.”

“So the sane always think and say,” interrupted Dr. T. “But could you witness half what we daily see of the diseases, mental and bodily, that rack the frames of those who do understand what their sufferings are, you would covet the happy delusions of some lunatics for those who are so heavily afflicted.”

“Poor unfortunates !” said Helen ; “would they could sometimes see to what they may be doomed ?”

“The sight would, I fear, avail them little,” said the doctor ; “nothing, indeed, while the nerves are still strong. Till those break, there are few among living things more bold and plucky than a woman ; but once one of the million delicate threads that spread through brain and heart, and that form so important a part of their wonderfully constructed system, receives a jar, then no creature’s state can be more pitiable. The love of excitement has increased naturally, but most alarmingly, with the means of gratifying it ; and never before have our lunatic asylums been so crowded with female patients. The class to which this unfortunate girl belongs, contributes (as I think I need not tell you) a painfully large proportion to the list of those who are expiating their faults and follies in a manner so deplorable.”

“And nothing that has yet been tried seems to have any effect in lessening the evil !”

“True, for human nature has an unfortunate propensity for commencing the disentanglement of a difficulty at the wrong end. The evil has its root in causes far deeper and earlier than the good people who preach up refuges, and contribute to reformatories, ever dream of. Those excellent individuals seem to expect that a miracle will follow on their efforts, forgetting that the age of miracles is past, and that everything is against their chance of success. The nineteenth century is prolific in many things—in the vanity and envy of its women not the least so, and it is to the exaggeration of those two qualities that I mainly attribute the increase of the mischief we are deplored.”

“Envy!” repeated Mrs. Vaughan, in some surprise.

“Yes,” said the doctor, “and I will prove to you that I speak advisedly. In almost every class of society it is envy of some advantages enjoyed by their neighbours which causes the less fortunate ones to live beyond their income, and to entail upon their children tastes and habits that lead them into misfortune and to vice.”

“I think,” said Helen, “that you are right as regards the middle and higher ranks; for experience has shown even me, that the luxuries which girls covet in marriage are often not so much grasped at for their own sakes, as because they are enjoyed by others to whom they cannot bear to feel themselves inferior—*inferior*, because they may have fewer jewels, fewer servants, fewer carriages! How often are we ourselves the shadow that stands between us and our own happiness!”

“Most true; but my remarks apply, I think, still more to what are called the ‘inferior’ classes of society. Have you never noticed that among those who formerly would have brought up their daughters to be domestic servants, or, at any rate, to earn their living by manual labour, few are found willing to do so now? There are small tradesmen, labourers of the richer class, retired gentlemen’s servants, all aiming at thrusting their daughters among what they call ‘gentlefolks.’ Believe me, that cheap dress, cheap accomplishments, and low-priced musical instruments have much to answer for.”

Helen laughed. “Ah,” she said, “I remember Katie Reilly once saying to me, that ‘it was the *pianner* as did the mischief.’”

“A great deal of it, I do believe; for girls listen to exciting sounds—they learn to dance and sing; they dress showily, and, above all, they don’t keep down the wild fancies and *imaginings* of youth by *work*. As children, everything may be done, but habits can only be formed then—later, it is impossible to change the evil ones that have been contracted.”

“I often think,” said Helen, “that if girls could (early in life, and with a careful eye to the homes chosen for them) be bound apprentice to some of the trades that are supposed to belong exclusively to men, it would advantage them greatly. Why should not this be the case with all the lighter ones? It would be such a blessed thing to give girls some object in life besides that of marriage. At present, with very few exceptions, all they aim at is to find some man able and willing

to support them by the labour of his head or hands. And what do *they* bring to help the housekeeping? And ought they to wonder that the husband, wearied by their idleness and improvidence, grows irritated by the encumbrance that has been thrown upon him? If, instead of wishing for their daughters a questionable gentility, and instructing them in arts and accomplishments above their station, parents could but see the advantage of giving them betimes some useful work to do, the girls themselves would, I am sure, be incalculably the gainers.”

“No doubt of it—but, as I said before, a silly ambition stands in the way of such a course being followed.”

“Still,” continued Mrs. Vaughan, for whom the subject had deep interest, “still I think that if the true womanly incentive of laying by a little store of money for a dower were held out to them, *some* young girls might be induced to work, and thus they would not only have a better chance of tiding over the dangerous time of stormy youth, but they would also have (in the future exercise of their own trade) a something wherewith to eke out the earnings of their husbands.”

“And, I suppose,” inquired the doctor, who did not quite follow Mrs. Vaughan in her scheme for female employment, “I suppose that you would have young women take the place of men behind the counter; and urge their customers to the purchase of their goods with their best smiles and most winning glances?”

“Indeed I would not,” replied Helen; “for, on the contrary, I should desire all women’s work to be done privately and quietly. As apprentices, in the way that I should propose, they would not be brought prominently before the public, and over their well-doing the careful eye of governing authority should ever be kept open.”

“And you propose that they should continue the exercise of their several trades after marriage?” remarked Doctor T. “You forget that they would probably then have other duties to perform, which might make the continuance of their industries impossible;” and he smiled professionally.

“I have not forgotten it,” said Helen; “but I believe that the hindrance those duties occasion to other work is greatly exaggerated. There are of course many cases when bodily weakness, or the sickness of children, may oblige a mother to devote her whole time to her offspring and to herself. But

these are the exceptions ; and whether you will allow them to be so or not, I, my dear doctor, am convinced that the idea prevalent among woman, that after marriage they need do nothing but bring children into the world, and take care they don't injure their little persons afterwards, is a pernicious mistake.”

“ And mistakes that have grown into habits are among the most difficult to eradicate. There is much to be said in favour of your plan, my dear Mrs. Vaughan ; but of one thing I am convinced, namely, that the mass of mankind prefer that a woman's career of action should not range beyond the performance of her domestic duties. But we are slightly diverging from our point, and forgetting that we are discussing some of the immediate causes of female degeneracy.”

“ Pray, forgive me,” said Helen, “ for my discursiveness. I have some subjects so much at heart, that I can hardly forbear to prose about them.”

The doctor, after complimenting his hostess on her zeal in a good cause, continued to put forth his own views on the matter.

“ One fruitful source of evil,” he said, “ lies, I believe, in the facility of bringing crowds of both sexes together. Excursion trains have other dangers besides those attendant on collisions—there are night returns, half-drunken men jostling giddy women—overcrowded carriages. All these causes bear their part in demoralizing the lower orders ; while for those a shade above them there are other excitements which, when once tasted of and enjoyed, must be fed by increased doses till the evil spirit becomes hard indeed to lay.”

“ But,” said Helen, “ while you know so well the symptoms, can you not suggest a possible remedy ? ”

“ None in any sudden changes, which are as ineffectual to a wholesome cure as is the immediate stopping of his daily dram to the drunkard. If these poor creatures be worth the saving, they are worth being patient for. We must not expect sudden reforms ; indeed my experience tells me that we should mistrust their existence when they are pointed out to us. My object would be to give them healthful occupation—occupation which, being remunerative, would give them a hope of an independent future. I would not allow them to mix unreservedly with others in the same position as themselves, but they should not be kept in gloomy silence ; for then the over-

strained nerves and spirits would react fatally on the mind, and the last state of the woman might be worse than the first. In the kind of refuge I would advocate, I should endeavour to persuade the good to mingle occasionally and judiciously with the bad ; and I would strive to encourage a healthy Hope, while sickly Despair should be driven far from its precincts. Oh ! Mrs. Vaughan, could you but see how many of those women's hearts still beat true to women's better instincts ! Could you but know how at the name of 'mother' their eyes glisten, and how at the touch of a little child I have more than once seen them show signs of deep emotion, you would feel with me, that in many instances only Hope is wanting to raise them from their degraded state."

"Hope and Charity," said Helen, "and also Faith ; for how few believe in either the sincerity or the continuance of reformation ! Women have, I fear, harder hearts than men, and will never admit even the most repentant of Magdalens quite within the pale of their companionship."

"No—they would keep her just outside, doling out charitable words which their deeds belied. God forgive them, for they that do such things have much to answer for."

The doctor rose to take leave, but ere he went, Helen proffered a request that she might bring Mrs. Reilly to see her suffering friend.

"Is it by her own wish you ask this?" inquired the doctor.

"No," answered Helen, "nor have I as yet even proposed the visit to her. But I cannot but think that the sight of poor Rhoda's altered face—of the room where she lies—of many things in short which she might witness in the hospital, may possibly produce some effect on the thoughtless creature, and, by God's blessing, cause her to pause in her career of vice. Pray, doctor, let her come."

"You may ask her," said he, significantly ; and Helen, glad of the implied permission, ordered her carriage, and drove to B—k Street.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

" He stood beside me,  
The embodied vision of the brightest dream,  
Which like a dawn heralds the day of life:  
The shadow of his presence made my world  
A Paradise."—SHELLEY.

IT was about one o'clock in the afternoon, and the mistress of the house was still at breakfast, when Mrs. Vaughan arrived at Katie's door. The latter had recovered her spirits, which had been a little shaken by Rhoda's sudden illness, and now looked fresh and rosy as the bunch of summer flowers that lay beside her plate.

" And how is poor Rhoda ?" she asked, when the greetings were over. " I sent yesterday to inquire, and they told me the poor little thing was no better ; and that hard-hearted fellow, Lorton, never to ask was she alive or dead ! The ruffian !"

" Never mind that, Katie. It is of no consequence who remembers, or who forgets her now. She must die soon, poor child !"

" Ah, the poor creature !" ejaculated Katie, wiping away a tear.

" Yes ; and I want to know if you would like to see her before she goes."

Katie reflected. " Is she sensible ?" she asked at length.

" No, I fear not, for she has not seemed to recognize any one yet."

" Then, faith, I won't make myself miserable by looking at the poor girl. If I could be doing her any good now, I'd go at once, and be glad to."

" I am sure you would. But, Katie, won't you come to oblige me ? I do so wish you would. Only to see her, dear—only to know what leading this life may bring us to."

It cost Helen some mental pain to say the little pronoun

that linked her with the unrepentant ; but she knew that in assimilating herself to the girl she hoped to influence lay her best chance of leading her to the abode of the raving and the desolate.

“And Katie,” she added, “you would feel for Rhoda so deeply, could you see the horrors of that dismal place.”

“Is it horrors?” said the girl, leaning back in her chair and speaking with unwonted energy. “I’ve had them myself—I’ve longed to die, but had not the courage to do away with myself ; for when I came to the water, it rushed so quick, and looked so cold and black—colder and blacker than life itself—that I turned away, and went back to my garret agin.”

“Was that long ago?” asked Mrs. Vaughan, gently.

“Not so very long—let me see,” and she counted on her fingers. “Just five years ago it is since I came to London. *He* (please not to ask me his name, for I couldn’t say the words), he was dead then—shot by the Russians. But would you like to hear the story? I can tell it now ; for I’ve grown hard enough since the day I crept home from the Black Bridge, and had no choice but to commence the life I’ve led since then.”

“Poor Katie! If it will be any comfort to talk to me of your sorrows, I will gladly listen ; and I can from my heart feel with you, for I too have had my share of fierce temptation, and, but for better fortune, might have been seen as you are this day.”

“I was a pretty girl when I was seventeen,” said Katie ; “and of course I knew it, for every one told me so ; and my father said my looks would make my fortune. He was an attorney in a small town, and he did pretty good business ; for the Irish, high and low, are fond of law, and my father perhaps encouraged them in the taste for it. We were what is called ‘snug’ enough, and kept an outside car, and what we called an inside man-servant. Just a poor-looking creature he was though, in a big, long coat, and not a button but one behind ;” and Katie laughed a little at the recollection. “But it was very proud of him we were—Sweeney his name was ; I wonder is he alive the day. I was the beauty of the family, and, as it was settled I was to have the learning too, I went to a school at Dublin, and there, among two score of other girls like myself, learnt to dress and sing and dance ; after which, I came home to be admired.

“It was a poor town where we lived, and having been used to see the gentlemen walk and ride about Dublin, I thought less than nothing of the boys near home ; and when I heard they said I was a ‘fine lump of a girl,’ I would not *deman*e myself to speak to one of them ; and it’s like enough they hated me for my conceit when they found they couldn’t make any hand of me. Not long after I came back from the Dublin school there was a county election, and the army was sent for to keep the peace. Among the English officers was a gentleman—a real gentleman—such as I hadn’t seen before. He had friends living near—his mother’s relations—rich country people, far too grand to take up with the likes of us : but *he* knew us—he wasn’t above coming to the house and taking his dinner with the attorney’s family. And oh, Mrs. Vaughan, dear ! but there was none like him, so handsome and brave, and yet as gentle and tender as a girl. He used to lend me books of poetry and sing with me in the evenings, and my mother thought he’d marry me ; but I never did, for I knew that he was far too out of sight above me. The country round talked of us ; and his cousins, the young ladies that lived in the great castle, would look at me when they drove into town as if I was worse than dirt ; but it was little I cared about their flouting, for he was all in the world to me, and I worshipped the very ground he trod on.”

“Poor, foolish girl !” said Helen, with a sigh that was well nigh a groan, so full of pity was it. “Poor, foolish girl ! and no one warned you that you were tottering on the brink of a precipice ?”

“No ; but it wasn’t poor I was then, anyway,” continued Katie ; “for all the while that he’d be singing and talking, and I listening to the music, it was as if I was in heaven—sure, I was in heaven that time ;” and Katie sighed heavily. “The last evening before the news came that he was to go (I mind it well ; for we were sitting together in the twilight by the *pianner*), he sang a song to me that made me cry a dale. This was what he sang :—

‘I’m bidding you a long farewell,  
My Katie kind and true;  
But I’ll not forget you, darling,  
In the land I’m going to.’

They were pretty, simple words ; and I thought it good of him

to sing the English for me, when he'd like the French and the German better. Ah, well ! morning came, and he was gone with the first light, and my light seemed to go along with him on the way.” And here there was a long pause ; for the girl's heart was full of memories that choked the words she would have spoken.

“Mrs. Vaughan, I was pure then, I swear it before God ; and I have said it in confession to the priest ; but it had gone hard with me to resist his prayers, and if he had stayed with me, God only knows what might have been ! And now he was gone, and I left alone to weary for him and break my heart. After many months he wrote to me, and told me that he wanted me,—that he pined for me in his snow-covered tent ; and when in the hospital he lay sick and wounded, I had no thought but to go to him ; so I wrote and said that I was coming, and many a word of love and deep devotion filled up the pages of my letter, as I bade him keep a good heart till Katie came.

“In another day I should have been far away, gone to him I loved, secretly and alone. All was ready. I had saved some money, and was leaving all for him—God, friends, and country —when the word came that he was killed !

“I did not lose my senses, but I was afraid to cry as much as I wanted to ; and I used to walk wearily about my room alone at night, panting and raving for him in my heart. I saw him before me with the cruel shot through his forehead, lying white and bleeding on the ground ; and then I followed him in fancy to the cold wet grave, where they had left him all alone, to moulder away in the darkness. Yes, I know that I was nearly maddened then ; but fear, and a something of woman's pride, made me keep the secret of my love (at least I thought so) from all but the kind priest who heard my confession. No, it was not poor Percy that has to answer to God for my lost soul ; and so to my dying day I'll say. But I must not cry this way and make a fool of myself. What's past is past ; but there's some that, while I breathe, I never will forget to hate !”

“Oh, hush, Katie ! do not be so rancorous and wicked,” whispered Helen.

“I cannot help it ; it turns my very blood to bitterness to think of what they did to me. I told you that I wrote to him letters burning with the love I bore him ; and those letters—

you will not believe it, it is too monstrous—but those letters, two of them that he had never lived to read, were returned sealed to his family. And his sisters read them ; and then—does it not seem almost impossible ?—they took away my character ! Yes, it's true as that I'm alive to tell it, that they spoke of me as a wicked girl, because the letters said I loved their brother better than my life ! But it was not for them to guess how I had been tried, and what I had resisted. And sure, what did hearts like theirs know of such a love as mine ?”

“How base ! how terribly dishonourable !” exclaimed Helen. “But is it not possible that you may be mistaken ? For it seems incredible that women could be found capable of violating the secrets of the dead, calumniating the memory of a brother who was no more, and blighting the existence of a woman who had loved him !”

“I know it's true,” replied Katie, moodily ; “and nothing short of proof would have made me think evil of any friends of *his*, and now, is it likely I'd forgive them for letting out of this to the cousins ? I was just driven away by the evil words they spoke of me, and sent to London to get help from others that knew him, and that I thought would not be hard on me, but would perhaps help me to help myself.”

“And you were disappointed ?”

“You may say that, for they wouldn't so much as speak to me ; and so, when I found myself looked upon that way, I thought I had better die, but I couldn't ; and after all, here I am—Katie Reilly—with plenty of friends—such as they are,” she added bitterly.

“But, Katie,” said Helen, “this cannot last ; for sickness may come, and then——”

“Time enough ! I am but twenty-two—five years perhaps before me—a short life and a merry one. No, I won't go to the Asylum, but do you take the rich ladies to see it. Take the ladies who help to make us what we are—take the ladies who abuse us, while they envy us.”

“Envy us ? Ah, Katie !—”

“Yes, envy us,” said the girl, vehemently. “Don't I see how they look at us in the Park, how they dress after us, talk like us, ride like us ? They see we have the men they want, the money they want, and the fashion they want. Yes, take *them* to the Asylum, and let the fine ladies learn a lesson there

that may make them truer to themselves and less insolent to others. Have I spoken nonsense? I dare say I have: anyway, I won't see poor Rhoda till she's sensible again. Good-bye, and thank you for the offer; and be sure I'll go, if ever Rhoda asks for me.”

And so, after all her pains and trouble, Helen failed in her attempt to draw Katie to St. Luke's, and was fain to return thither without the companion whose reformation she had so deeply at heart.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

“A ruffian—one for ever linked and bound  
To guilt and infamy.

Wouldst thou know more? My story is an old one.”

ROGERS.

WHEN Peters paid his last visit to L——, and told the miser Considine that he was about to embark for Australia, the former for once kept his word; for the success of his own projects required his presence where he was going, and *one* was there on whom that success chiefly depended. Excited by the fear of his son's threatened exposure, and anxious at any cost to put the world between himself and his tormentor, Mr. Considine was liberal in his contributions towards the expense of the expedition. Peters accepted the money, as though conferring a favour on the giver, assuring him that he was undertaking the distant voyage at great inconvenience to himself, and that nothing short of deep anxiety for his friend's fate would have induced him to leave England. This assertion passed uncommented on by Considine, who, too much wrapped up in himself to disclose his own motives to others, was

content to take what was said for granted in order to save himself the trouble of investigation.

The old man stood at his window to witness the departure of his odious visitor ; and it was with a sensation more nearly allied to happiness than he had felt for years, that he mentally prayed (while rubbing his withered hands together) for the immediate confounding, and ultimately warm reception in a place that shall be nameless, of his persecutor.

It had been sorely against his will that Peters had found himself forced to carry about with him the son of his old acquaintance. Had there been one person in his confidence—one confederate with whom to act, this need not have been ; but hitherto Peters's creed had been that “he who takes a partner takes a master,” and on that belief he had invariably acted.

The old man from whom he had just parted remained in utter ignorance of the fact that often, and very near to him had been the child of his neglected son, and the inheritor by right of his accumulated thousands.

They were speeding rapidly away now—the man whose visits he had dreaded, and the boy, whose future was, humanly speaking, in that bad man's hands. Arrived at Liverpool, Peters lost no time in taking possession of the berths he had previously secured in one of the magnificent vessels that run between that port and Sydney. Henry Considine was as little troublesome as any one in his unfortunate position could be ; for he was quiet and submissive—content, too, to remain for the greater part of the day immured in the cabin, to which none but Peters found entrance.

The passage occupied a longer time than is usually employed in the transit from England to those distant regions, for they had both contrary winds and long calms to delay them on their voyage ; and four weary months had slipped away before the eyes of those on board were gladdened by the welcome sight of Australian land.

But ere the good ship nears the promised land let us take a glance on board of her, and singling out the two in whose movements we are interested, see in what manner they are occupied.

The boy (whose name, as we have before said, is Henry, though he knows it not, nor answers to it) is seated, huddled up under one of the bulwarks of the vessel. He does not

understand, poor wretch! that though the tropical sun is shining fiercely overhead, and though no breath of air can fan his scorched cheek where he is sitting, yet on the other side, and beneath the widespread awning, he would feel the freshness of the wind, and be sheltered from the burning heat. His hand is lifted to his head—what is passing there, God only knows! for through the “gloomy vaults of the dull idiot’s brain”—dark “passages that lead to nothing”—who can ever say what veiled mysterious spirits may be wandering to and fro? At last one approaches him, and lays a hand on his shoulder: the boy shrinks away, uttering a strange guttural sound, and cowers lower to the deck.

The fellow-being who has touched him is a woman, and she stands near him with black serge garments flowing on the snow-white deck. Her face is small and pale, and her eyes are full of love and holy thoughts. Across her low smooth forehead a band of white is laid, and from her girdle hangs her rosary and cross. She is a nun of the Order of Mercy, and is the “Lady Superior,” who, with four others of the sisterhood, are on their way to Sydney, to establish there a convent of their order. Women they are, pure in spirit as in body, who, not shutting themselves from the world in the dark austerities of a cloister, nor trusting only in barren prayers for mercy from on High, are doing their Father’s work on earth—far from home and country, friends and relations—content to live, so they may pluck one brand from the burning—content to die, if by dying they may “win Christ.”

The nun, looking at the boy with eyes full of compassion, spoke to him. She knew his infirmity, and was not surprised that he answered not; so calling to a sailor who was passing, she asked him, “Would he take the boy, and put the poor fellow where he would get a trifle of shade upon his head?” “Sister Mary” was a countrywoman of the strong sailor that she had enlisted in poor Henry’s service; and the man, acknowledging her right to command his services, did her bidding at once.

And the ship rolls slowly on, now in sunshine, and now in storm; while the moody Peters, pacing the deck in stolid silence, sees men look at him askance, and hears them whisper of the mystery that appears to shroud him.

At last the weary time is over, and all that have, through months of waiting, lived and talked together, are to go their

different ways in the new world to which the stout ship *Sea Horse* has at length transported them.

As they entered the glorious harbour of Sydney, the crowded decks gave token of the eager curiosity of the passengers. Peters, too, betrayed a certain amount of the feeling so evidently experienced by the rest ; but it was not on the picturesque headlands that his eyes were fixed, but on the town itself, and on the capabilities which, to judge from its appearance, it offered for his private and particular advancement.

Peters was accompanied, on his landing from the ship, not only by his usual fellow-traveller, but by a young lad, one of the steerage passengers, whom he had engaged as his servant. He was in tolerably prosperous circumstances, thanks to his various exactions ; and his appearance and demeanour being not very objectionable, he found little difficulty in picking up acquaintances in the hotels and gambling-houses of Sydney. Not long, however, did he remain there ; for visions of future fortune, to be met with in the goldfields, took possession of his imagination, and drew his steps in their direction.

Of what passed during the years that Peters spent between the fluctuations of hopes and fears, and while warring with the ups and downs of fortune, no record has been kept ; but there came a time when circumstances induced him to return to Sydney, and in that town we again find him.

In the beautiful gardens to which the society of Sydney resort for recreation and for exercise, two young men might, one glowing summer's day, have been seen sauntering. The shade under the tall pine-trees was delicious, and after a while they seated themselves on one of the numerous benches placed for the accommodation of visitors, and made comments on the ladies that passed before them.

One of the young men was tall and dark—he was handsome, too, but with a countenance which, even at the first view, was far from pleasing. His companion was a short, stout individual, with a broad cheerful face, guileless and happy-looking. The latter was the more loquacious of the two, his conversation running almost entirely on the charms of the “fair sex,” and on the respective merits of those possessed by the various young ladies on whom their eyes from time to time rested.

“And so you wouldn't marry a convict's daughter, Harry ?” remarked the cheerful-looking *flâneur*. “Not even if she had the tin ?”

“Too metallic,” answered his friend; “I should always be thinking of the irons.”

“Your friend Peters has plenty of *them* in the fire, by all accounts. He is always at me about some scheme or other—wants me to marry that girl of old Luke’s; but, by George, I don’t think I could stand it! Fancy having that infernal old thief for a father-in-law! Eh, Considine?”

“Not pleasant; but then, if you stay in the country, it doesn’t so much matter. I am in a different position—quite independent, you know; and in a year or two I shall be in England. How jolly it will be to cut this concern! My grandfather is the horridest old brute in existence, or I should never have been here.”

“And Peters, and that poor fellow he takes about? I say, Considine, between ourselves now; is it his son?”

“Well, I rather think he must be, though, of course, Peters don’t like to own a son and heir like that. I knew very little of the man himself. My grandfather sent him out to look after me—a sort of bear-leader; but I shall be glad enough to shake him off. It’s a sort of thing one does not like, you know.

Little more was said; and the pair, soon after the last remark, slowly walked away, arm-in-arm, towards their respective dwellings in the town; and through the crowded “Park,” where carriages, filled with gaily-dressed ladies, and horsemen and female equestrians, passed them in rapid movement, the two young men, in the cool evening air, sauntered onwards. For a few minutes they stopped to listen to the regimental band, which was stationed within hearing, and for the entertainment of the pleasure-seeking crowd. The air was one of those thunderingly noisy ones which Verdi introduces into his operas, as though purposely for the martial music played by drums and trumpets. The listeners were evidently delighted, and the crowd round the performers grew every moment denser. It was hard to penetrate it; but just at the height of the pleasurable excitement, and while the very loudest of the brazen notes boomed out upon the air, a man, who had worked his way through the close-packed throng, touched the individual whom we have heard called Considine on the shoulder.

“Come away,” he said, with a hissing whisper, which was heard distinctly by him to whom it was addressed, despite

the wild crashing of the drums. “Come away; the Devil’s been at work! *He’s* gone. I went home, and found the house empty.”

An oath, deep and almost savage, broke from the young man’s lips; and without an instant’s delay, and waiving the ceremony of a “good-bye” to his late companion, he too commenced the difficult task of elbowing his way out of the crowd.

“When did you miss him?” were his first words.

“Two hours ago; and I have been looking for him, and for you, ever since.”

“But how did he get away? Wasn’t the lock safe? Speak, man! Why the D——l don’t you say how it was?”

“A woman who lodges in the next room was frightened by the noise he made, or was curious—God knows—some cursed female humbug. And she tried her key; it fitted the lock, and she let him out. That’s her story.”

And the story was a true one, as true as that the idiot was no longer in the custody and at the mercy of his former guardian. For many days the latter sought for him in vain; but at the end of a week it was discovered that a forlorn creature, ill-dressed, misshapen, and disfigured by a ghastly wound, had been picked up in the street one night, and carried to the hospital.

On hearing this intelligence, coupled with the information that the sufferer’s life was despaired of, those who had so diligently searched for him at once left the city, and were seen for a time in their accustomed haunts no more.

When the person of the wounded young man was examined by the surgeons, it was discovered that his skull was fractured, though how or when the accident (for accident it seemed to be) had happened there was no evidence to show. The unfortunate being was quite unconscious (a state that was fully accounted for by the injuries he had received); and at first it appeared doubtful whether the life, that seemed to hang upon a thread, could be saved by human skill. Every means, however, which surgical experience and the most benevolent solicitude could bring to bear upon the case were resorted to; and the humane efforts of the medical men, and the devoted nurses, were at last rewarded with a partial success.

When Henry Considine (for so we must still call him), after months of wearying pain (during the early period of which he

had appeared as one asleep), had returned, as it were, to life, he was in many respects an altered being. His case had from the first seemed to those who watched over him a curious one; he had been successfully “trepanned,” and, as he struggled slowly back to a consciousness of existence, it seemed as though a something that had pressed upon his brain had been removed from it. Those who tended him could not doubt that, by some inscrutable decree of Providence, Henry Considine had been born without the organs of speech and hearing; but there was that in his eye that betokened the possibility of awakening his slumbering intelligence; and, moreover, he displayed a gentle docility that interested those about him in his favour. The excellent Sisters of Mercy who visited the hospital were unremitting in their endeavours to improve both the bodily and mental condition of the invalid; and by slow degrees they had the satisfaction of seeing that the poor fellow understood and appreciated their efforts for his benefit.

After Considine had been about five months in the hospital, he was allowed to leave the sick-ward, and crawl about in the yard of the building. He was considerably altered in appearance since the day when, crushed and bleeding, he was carried into that refuge for the wounded and the sick. He looked older, and had grown taller; moreover the mass of heavy flesh had greatly lessened, and his face and form had entirely lost their revolting and unnatural appearance.

Many efforts had been made to discover the relations of the apparently friendless young man; but those efforts proving utterly fruitless, it seemed as though he would remain a burthen on the institution to which he owed his almost miraculous recovery.

Two years more passed away, and the harmless creature they had rescued from death had become an object of interest—nay, almost of affection—to those in authority at the Asylum, where he still lived. He was employed in many light works of labour, such as sweeping the court, cleaning the doorhandles, and such like easy work; and his mild obedience, as by degrees the sphere of his intelligence became widened, was gladly noticed and commented on.

One day the uniform tenor of his life was broken in upon by a visitor, who announced himself as “Mr. Peters,” and who, on being ushered into the presence of the superintendent of the institution, proclaimed himself to be the uncle and

guardian of the young man, who had appeared to be so friendless. There seemed no reason to doubt his word, or to suspect that in handing over the poor fellow to his care, a cruel injury was being done to a helpless fellow-mortal. As for the unsuspecting youth himself, he had evidently no recollection of the man who claimed him; but then (as Peters averred) he had been an idiot, and to prove this he offered to bring forward witnesses to attest the fact, and also that the young man had formerly been under his care.

So Peters's vile projects were once more to all appearances successful, and again did he hold in his hand the fate of one whose sad infirmity should have been his protection from evil and his safeguard against oppression. On leaving the hospital, with his prisoner's arm linked in his, Peters was joined by another and a younger man, and the three left the city on the following day together.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

“The earth hath bubbles as the water has,  
And these are of them.” \* \* \* SHAKESPEARE.

WE return now to another sufferer—one who at an English Refuge is expiating her many sins. It was many weeks before any perceptible improvement took place in Rhoda Mason's condition; and Mrs. Vaughan, while she anxiously watched for some token of returning reason, was the more led to desire them from feeling that it had become a duty to ascertain the whereabouts of Rhoda's relations, and to inform them of the poor girl's condition. She had always felt that in the unhappy creature's manners and mode of speech there had been something that told of gentle rearing; and even now, as she jab-

bered and muttered in her incoherent talk, there was nothing that betrayed an early association with the coarse or with the wicked. In vain, however, did Helen endeavour to discover those who might (or possibly might not) thank her for restoring to them their child ; and, as a last resource, she resolved to put in some of the leading journals an advertisement, in which the somewhat uncommon name of “Rhoda” would appear conspicuously. For a week or so she continued to hope that this method of obtaining information would be successful ; but when day followed day, and no answer came, she resigned herself to her melancholy duties as the sole protectress of the friendless girl, with this one consolation—that she had done her best.

Meanwhile, and by the slowest of all possible degrees, Rhoda’s mental powers began to recover something of a more healthful tone ; and with all the skill that vast experience gives, the promising symptoms were gently encouraged to expand and develope themselves. It was a great pleasure to Helen when she first saw a light in her young friend’s eyes that told her she was recognized. From that day her mental improvement was sure, yet gradual ; and all the more certain was the amelioration from the fact that, as the brain appeared to clear, the bodily health declined, the cough became more frequent and distressing, and the weakness daily more perceptible.

The moment that the medical men decided that it would be expedient to move the now nearly rational patient from the Asylum, Helen was at hand to assist in conveying her into the quiet country, where, by change of air and scene, a temporary rally of her strength might be hoped for. They journeyed by slow stages, stopping to rest whenever the signs of fatigue were at all visible on the pale girl’s face ; and thus lingeringly, but not altogether unpleasurably to Helen, they arrived at Southampton.

A longer stay in that place was pronounced absolutely necessary, as the excitement of change and movement had brought on a slight return of Rhoda’s fever, and something of rambling and incoherence in her speech. Absolute quiet again allayed those painful symptoms ; and at length, and after a fortnight had been spent upon the journey, the travellers found themselves established in the Isle of Wight. It was on the outskirts of the little village at Brading that Helen chose

her abode ; and there, in a small but pretty cottage, the windows of which looked towards the sunny south, she brought the girl to die.

Does the reader know anything of that quaint and quiet village, with its grey old church (one of the most ancient that our country boasts) standing in its picturesque simplicity among the aged yew-trees ? If he does know the place, he will not marvel that Helen deemed it one likely (in its calm repose) to awake in Rhoda’s heart some distant memory of her childhood, which might turn her thoughts to softer and more melting themes ; for as yet the poor girl’s eyes had been dry—dry as her parched hands, and as the desert of her sin-stained heart.

The result proved that Mrs. Vaughan had not hoped in vain ; for on the first Sunday after their arrival, when the drowsy church-bells from its not far-distant steeple called the villagers to prayer, Rhoda raised herself on her couch, and listened eagerly. Then the little fingers (on one of which a ring hung loosely) covered her eyes, and the tears fell slowly from them on her lap. Helen noted the signs, but without speaking smoothed the hair on the poor wearied head, and kissed it gently.

“It seems like home, long ago,” murmured the poor girl,—“like home, and mother’s voice !”

Again she was silent, and again Helen smoothed the hair, and kissed the low white forehead.

The bells rang on, first a peal of melody, and then the single notes, slowly repeated like a toll.

“Mother !” cried Rhoda, with a wild burst of tears. “Mother, pardon me ! Mother, come and take me !”

And then Helen laid the drooping head on her own warm heart, hushing her to sleep like a wearied infant on its parent’s breast.

From that hour Mrs. Vaughan’s task became easier : for Rhoda no longer seemed to shrink from companionship into her own miserable self, but would listen gratefully while her friend read and talked to her ; and far from fighting against the approaches of the last dread enemy, she had grown to look upon her malady as a friend by whom she would obtain rest from all her troubles.

There were few to note their presence in that retired spot, though, occasionally, some of the dwellers in the gay towns

upon the island, or some amateur sailors landed from their yachts, were tempted to invade their solitude. These, in the absence of more congenial pastime, would inquire for the sexton and his keys ; and after strolling about the time-worn church (for that same church is one of the island *lions*), and commenting on the curious monuments and effigies of the dead, would return to their amusements and their business.

But Helen and the repentant girl were brought by other motives to the house of prayer. Together they knelt on the grey stones of the ancient aisle, knowing that in deep humility alone could they venture to approach the altar of their God. There was a peaceful stillness in the darkened church that soothed and composed the spirits of Rhoda ; but the evenings (when, with her friend by her side, she was able to walk slowly around the churchyard) were those that pleased her best—pleased her with a melancholy pleasure, in which Helen fully sympathized.

Among the gravestones was one that bore upon its weather-stained surface the name of a village maiden who had died many years before, but whose life is chronicled in one of those short and simple annals of the poor that have sometimes succeeded in awakening the sympathies of the rich. “Little Jane,” the “Dairymaid’s Daughter,” sleeps in Brading Churchyard, and few that visit that lonely spot fail to pause a moment at her grave.

Rhoda, with her frail form supported by her companion, read in silence the stanzas written on the stone, and, as she read, tears for her own misguided life filled her eyes :—

“Forgive, blest shade ! the tributary tear  
That mourns thy exit from a world like this !  
Forgive the wish that would have kept thee here  
And stayed thy progress to the realms of bliss !

“No more confined to grovelling scenes of night,  
No more a tenant wrapped in mortal clay,  
My soul should rather hail thy glorious flight,  
And trace thy journey to the realms of day !”

“How good she must have been !” said Rhoda, when she had read the lines—“how good and happy !” and then they slowly proceeded on their way, for the hearts of both were too full for comment on the lines.

At the utmost limits of the pretty burialplace, and in a

corner where rank grass grows up unheeded, and where weeds and nettles flourish, seven graves are visible. There are no stones above them, and only the raised earth to show that the dead are sleeping there. Under those sods lie the remains of a mother and her six children, the mounds of the latter gradually decreasing in size, from that of the eldest-born to the grave of the little infant of days. Death came upon that family unawares, and the cruel blows were dealt them by the husband and the father.

“And no record of their names, or when they died ?” said Helen, turning to the old sexton, who (spade in hand) had followed them to tell his favourite tale.

“Wull, there’s be soom as say t’as as wull not. Better let it be forgot—that’s what soom of the gentlefolks say.”

“But the unhappy man was insane, so that the deed was one for which he was not accountable. Those are not the graves of a murderer’s children ; and they may have relations, too, who would like to think the place were cared for.”

“Wull, there be soom gentlefolks as say as you do,” said the old man, resting on his spade. “I can’t just say ; they might have had friends, surely.”

“Did you know the poor man himself ?”

“Not to say to speak to. I’ve heard say he’d been many weeks bad in his head afore he took on to kill the poor things, and that ’twas known ’twas so. I says what I hears ; and now he’s shut up, they say, during Her Majesty’s pleasure. That’s what they tells me.”

“And I too was mad !” said Rhoda, nervously, as they turned away.

“Yes, love ; but that is past, and God has been very merciful ; and when your senses wandered, you were, as ever, under His care.”

On the evening of the next day Rhoda spoke to Mrs. Vaughan, for the first time, of her father.

“Would,” she said, “that I could hope that he had forgiven me !”

“You can do more than hope, dear child—you can send for him, and, having confessed your sin, may hope to receive his pardon.”

“I cannot,” she said, in uncontrollable agitation. “How can I see him again, when I have disgraced him ? Dear Mrs. Vaughan, you do not know—you cannot tell what a home

mine was ; so happy were we all together, and so tenderly did my father love us.”

“Then, dear Rhoda, what was your excuse ?” asked Helen, “and why did you leave your father’s house ? Why are you now an alien from his roof ?”

“Because I was foolish, vain, and reckless, and because I was tempted more than I could bear. My father was an old man—very old he had always seemed to me ; for his hair was snowy white, and his form was bent. It is three years since I saw him, and, perhaps, sorrow may have made him now seem older still. Perhaps, too——But no, I will not think of that—I will not believe that I have killed my father !”

“And your mother ?” asked Helen, willing to change the topic to one less agitating — “tell me of your mother.”

“My mother was many years younger than my poor father, and always seemed to treat him with something of the affectionate deference of a daughter. We were a large family, and all the household cares devolved upon her ; for my father (when not occupied in his parish) was always in his study reading and writing. He was very fond of and tender to his children, and there were seven of us to care for ; but I do not remember that he ever interfered with our education in any way, only he was particular that we were all at prayers and never stayed away from church. My mother spoiled us all—I am sure she did, now that I look back upon my childish days, and can remember how she laboured for our pleasures, depriving herself of many things that we might enjoy them, and even burthening her conscience with small falsehoods, told in love, that the faults of her children might be concealed from all eyes but hers. We were generally idle, and I do not remember that our mother ever obliged us to do anything we did not like to do.”

She paused, and her auditor began to think it not so surprising that poor Rhoda had fallen away from the paths of virtue ; for again there was evident the deplorable want of early habits of self-control, and, above all, of constant and mind-invigorating occupation.

“And how long did this life continue ?” she asked. “How long did you remain idle ? Surely in your father’s parish you had some work to do, a Sunday-school to attend to, or the clothes of the poor little naked creatures to make ; for on their

entrance into life, such things are done by all clergymen's daughters,—at least I have heard so ?”

“ Not by us,” said Rhoda. “ It was my mother who visited the schools, and did the needlework ; for we disliked the task, and, as I said before, she let us do as we would. When I went to school, I was at first very unhappy ; for I was obliged to learn, and to study hard at the various accomplishments which were to turn me into a governess. I believe I was not very clever, and I certainly hated books and employment of any kind ; but I did love amusement, and enjoyed the fun of outwitting the teachers and getting my own way. This was an amusement to me at first, but it soon ceased to be merely that ; for in the school to which I had been sent, there were those who early taught me things that made concealment and duplicity matters of necessity. I will not relate to you all I learnt and all I read in that place, and at the instigation of two elder girls, corrupt to the very heart and ready for any wickedness. I fear I was an apt pupil ; for when, at the age of seventeen, I returned to my father's vicarage, I had at any rate ceased to be shocked at the changed heart that I brought with me.

“ After a while, the pure air of home, though it made me feel less wicked, seemed to make me get quite dull and sad. I pined for something, though I scarce know what, and that something was the excitement I had tasted of. At that period there was an occasional visitor at our house, who (as I can now understand) should never have been admitted among us. He was a good-looking and thoroughly profligate young man, heartless, vain, and frivolous. My mother encouraged his visits to please her children ; and my father, I verily believe, hardly noticed either his comings or his goings. You will have guessed what followed—I am sure you have ; for was I not prepared both by habits and education to fall into the first snare that was laid for me ?

“ I will pass over the details, and hasten to what followed after the departure of my lover from the neighbourhood. He left me—promising to marry me—professing ardent love, and conjuring me to meet him in London. His passion was, though I guessed it not, spent then ; but I, still believing him, promised all he asked. Months after I wrote to him to say that I must join him, must throw myself on his protection, or die.

“ In his reply he promised to meet me at a certain station,

halfway between my home and London. Hurriedly, and without a word of farewell to those I loved, I left my home, and never since have I heard from my family. The man who had worked my ruin was not at the place of meeting. In agonized suspense I proceeded to London, and calling at what I knew was his London lodging, I heard that he was abroad. Then despair and, with it, sudden illness seized me, and for a while all was blank. When I recovered, I was the inmate of a Lying-in Hospital. My child had been born prematurely, and was dead, so I had but myself to care for. They could not keep me at the hospital, to which I had been carried in my extremity; so one day I found myself out on the wide world, with no home but the one I would have died rather than return to, and with barely more than sufficient money to procure me a lodging for the night.

“Dear Mrs. Vaughan, I will not deceive you by false representations, or endeavour to describe myself as less sinful than I am. I can tell you of no hesitation, no remorse, nor thoughts of self-destruction to rid me of a life I should have loathed. At once I entered on my career of vice; and what that career has led me to, you, to whom I owe so deep a debt of gratitude, know full well. Tell me, now you know the whole, whether there exists one so vile, so plunged in deep iniquity, and that without excuse, as I have been?”

“It is not for me to judge you, poor child!” said Mrs. Vaughan, who had been deeply touched by her story. “God only knows the heart, and will (let us hope) make allowance for the weak creatures He has made, remembering that they have been tempted. But, Rhoda, it is of your earthly father of whom I now must speak to you. The poor old man! it may be that he is not in life to know his sorrow and your fault; but if he be, oh! Rhoda, do not delay an hour, but write at once, one line, to ask him for his pardon.”

“I cannot; he was a gentleman, and proud and stern when angered.”

“A gentleman! and proud! dear Rhoda? Alas! what are we all in the sight of Him at whose tribunal we shall so shortly stand? Dear child, I have tried to trace your father; and more than once, when you were lying helpless and unconscious, I even put your name into the columns where so many sad prayers to absent relatives find a place; but the advertisement was not answered, so I could do no more.”

Rhoda was now panting for breath. "My name!" she cried. "Oh! Mrs. Vaughan, surely you could not——?"

"Indeed I did. I hoped the name of Rhoda would meet the eye of some who had once loved you, and that they might see your poor changed face again, and pity you."

Rhoda's countenance brightened visibly, and, with something approaching the arch smile of her thoughtless days, she said—"They could hardly answer to Rhoda, for my name is Lucy."

She was (as she truly said) not a clever girl, but in her disposition there was much of the natural craftiness that is the armour of the weak; and her "gentle dullness being of the kind that ever loves a joke," the old habit of finding entertainment in cunningly outwitting others, brought a smile to her lips as she thought how mightily Mrs. Vaughan had been mistaken.

The latter was disappointed. With the more constantly serious aims of a higher nature before her, she could hardly understand that a love for such frivolous amusement could still cling to one on whom death looked so closely. For a moment she allowed her vexation to appear.

"Rhoda," she said, "can it be that you are rejoiced at a deception which may deprive you of a pardon from your father?"

The girl sank into herself abashed and frightened. Utterly alone she felt at that dismal moment, when she feared she had alienated her last friend; and then, almost for the first time (for Helen's constant care had guarded her from the sense of her desolation), she felt the full bitterness of the punishment she had called down upon her head.

"God forgive me!" she cried, with a voice of utter hopelessness. "God forgive me, for I have no other friend!"

"You have one, Rhoda," said Mrs. Vaughan, "who will never desert you, but in return I make you one request. Promise me that, before it is too late, I may write to your home, and say that you are here."

"I promise," faltered Rhoda; "but you will do nothing without first telling me; you will not bring them here unknown to me—I could not bear it."

Helen turned from the feeble creature contemptuously, but in another moment blamed herself for the action.

"Poor child!" she said, "you are nervous, and your feelings are overwrought. You shall rest now, and rest in perfect faith.

What I do shall be done openly. By me you shall never be deceived.” And so, comforted and supported, the tired invalid lay down under the shadow of that gentle presence, and slept long and calmly.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

“Ce qui fait qu'on n'est pas content de sa condition, c'est l'idée chimérique qu'on se forme du bonheur d'autrui.”—BOSSUET.

We left Arthur Brandreth and his friend Paulett meditating a consultation on the morrow with the learned and sagacious barrister, who was to bring both his professional knowledge and his worldly wisdom to bear upon the case submitted to him.

Mr. Gatherock listened attentively to Brandreth's statement, looking over the documents and papers, and showing by not the slightest sign, either of look or tone, that he was impressed either favourably or otherwise with the merits of the case that had been confided to him.

“And is this all?” he asked, when Arthur, whose budget was evidently empty, scanned his hard face in hopes of finding an opinion there.

“Yes; but I think——”

“My dear sir,” interposed Gatherock, happily for yourself you are not a lawyer, or you would probably not have consulted me to-day. I have been less favoured by fortune, and am here to *think* for my clients. This is a curious case; I do not deny that it is a very curious case. Your object is to establish the fact that Lady Thornleigh was at one period of her life lawfully married to a gentleman of the name of Considine. Is this the business, as you wish me to understand it?”

"It is," replied Brandreth; while Paulett, amused at the dry professional tone assumed by his usually facetious friend, endeavoured to look as solemn as the occasion seemed to demand.

"Good. And it is also (as it appears) of importance to the interests of the lady in question that the circumstance of her *bond fide* marriage with Mr. Considine should be made as public as possible?"

"As public as possible," said Arthur, repeating the words with marked emphasis.

"Good again. And you ask my opinion as to the best course to pursue, in order to arrive at the notoriety you desire? Now, an action for defamation would probably be the best way of—"

But here Brandreth interrupted him.

"Impossible!" he said. "I am certain that neither Lady Thornleigh nor her sister would consent to having their names dragged before the public, and printed in the columns of a newspaper."

Paulett could not restrain a laugh at this outbreak. "Why, it seems to be the very thing they want," he said. "Who is to know (unless the newspapers tell them so) that Lady Thornleigh is a much-injured lady, who for years has been kept out of her proper place in society, and is ready to walk into it again directly she is invited? It strikes me that Gatherock's idea is excellent: his pockets would be filled, and Lady Thornleigh's emptied, while we should all have the amusement of seeing and reading the details."

Arthur looked annoyed. "I wish," he said, "that some other method could be devised; but if that be impossible, we had better at once discuss the question of how the action is to be carried on."

"And against whom," said the lawyer; "for I hope you will allow that the part of defendant is not an unimportant one in an action at law."

Arthur looked puzzled.

"Out with him, or her," cried Johnnie, laughing provokingly. "Don't make a secret of it, man—who's the 'mysterious stranger'?"

Brandreth was obliged to confess that there was no one, except Wraxham, whom he could charge with the guilt of slander.

“And against him, as I told you, you haven’t the shadow of a case,” retorted Johnnie.

“The part of Hamlet left out!” said the lawyer, throwing off his professional mask. “My dear Mr. Brandreth, I shall be delighted on some future day to conduct a case for you in any court, and to take your fees at any time; but there must be something to go upon, and in a case where there is no accusation, I can hardly see how there can be any defence.”

After a little more conversation the friends left the barrister’s chambers and pursued their walk westward.

“I told you it was useless,” said Johnnie, a little triumphantly; “but take my advice again, and get Lady Thornleigh and Co. to London; for what can a woman expect who buries herself in Brittany? Of course people say she daren’t show her face anywhere else. It will be up-hill work for her certainly in London, without a good house and a fat jointure; but mind my words that something will turn up.”

“I hope to Heaven it may!” said Arthur, despondingly.

“And I tell you another thing—have young Thornleigh up. Women get on much better if they’ve a man, be he ever so young, belonging to them. Bring the boy to London, and trust to Providence.”

Arthur acted on Paulett’s advice (advice which was warmly seconded by his own wishes), and wrote to urge the immediate removal of the family to London. At first Gertrude was very unwilling to assent to the proposal; but as her sister’s heart seemed set upon the change, she yielded, and in another fortnight the travellers arrived at the house in which Brandreth had engaged apartments for them.

It was not in any of what are called the “good neighbourhoods” that Arthur chose the abode where the lady of his affections was to reside. Beyond Oxford Street, and leaving the Edgware Road some way behind, you would come to the narrow street and most unpretending domicile of the returned exiles. To Alice, the consciousness that she was near Arthur, and the feeling that it was by his clear judgment they were acting, brought almost unmixed happiness and satisfaction; but to Gertrude, the knowledge that she was again in England—again within reach of calumnious tongues—brought only bitterness; and sitting down with her regrets, and her well-remembered mortifications, she almost refused to hope for a brighter future.

Nearly three years had at that time elapsed since Lady Thornleigh had seen her son. He had previously to that time been in the habit of paying short yearly visits to Kelhouet ; but as those visits had never appeared to give any especial pleasure either to the payer or to the recipient, they had been by tacit and mutual consent discontinued. The truth was that Edgar had been greatly prejudiced against his mother ; and being prejudiced, his manner had always been wanting in warmth and in a show of filial respect and affection. Lady Thornleigh was not backward in perceiving that this was the case, and hence arose the mutual restraint that made their intercourse so rare and so little valued by both.

Alice had hoped that Edgar would come at once to his mother when he heard that she was in England, but in that hope she was disappointed ; nor was she better pleased at the result of a few attempts (made by Arthur's advice) to remind some of their former friends of Lady Thornleigh's existence. Cards were left at her house, and a few thundering knocks dealt by giant footmen proclaimed to the neighbours that “ carriage company” were among the acquaintances of those quiet women. But here the attentions of their former friends had ceased : there were no invitations, no expressed wish for meetings ; and even the few rich relations, whose position and wealth might have aided them, kept carefully aloof.

“Arthur,” said Alice one evening to her lover, “ we must try and transplant Marie into the country ; she is pining in this poisonous atmosphere.”

“ You discontented woman ! what has happened now ?”

“ Every sort of affront and disappointment.”

“ Disappointment and affront ! And to that child ?”

“ Yes ; she had golden dreams of the pleasures of London, and had imbibed ideas of amusement and gay companionship—I know not how. The reality is a shock to her ; but what is more hurtful to her still, are the bitter mortifications she endures at the slights we meet with.”

“ And what are those slights ?” asked Brandreth, calmly, though the blood had mounted to his brow at the ideas which Alice's speech had suggested.

“ To you, or to any *man*, they might seem as nothing,” replied Alice, “ and for myself I care not for them ; but for a young heart full of hope and enthusiasm, and for the sake of our darling Marie, who is so fresh and new to the world's

cruelties, I confess that my blood boils, and my soul rebels at the affronts that are heaped upon us.”

“ My dear Alice,” said Arthur, almost alarmed at her impetuosity, “ this will never do. Let me know what has called forth all this sudden anger, and allow me to decide whether you are calling things by their right names.”

“ Well, then, there is not one of those ‘fine ladies’ who, in the days of our prosperity, used to flatter and fawn upon us, that has done more in the way of civility than send their cards by the footmen, who leave them at our door. Only to-day Gertrude and I were taking our morning walk in the Park with Marie ; and as we were returning, we met Lady Doncaster (Flo. Mackenzie, you know). She could not help stopping to speak to us ; for it is not so very long ago that she was one of us, spending weeks at our house, and being intimate as a sister. But oh, Arthur ! you do not know how odious her manner was—repelling, patronizing, condescending, everything that was most hard to bear. I saw Gertrude’s pale face grow paler still, and Marie’s cheeks were crimson ; but we could only bear it—only hope never to see that insolent creature again, and wish with all our hearts that we were once more in our quiet country-house in Brittany.”

“ Alice, forgive me,” said Arthur ; “ it is my fault for urging your return. I had not reckoned enough on the cruel heartlessness of the great London world. It is the old story—the strong tyrannizing over the weak, and the weak showing that the strong have power to pain.”

“ Nay, Arthur ; angry as I was, I did not attribute our former friend’s conduct to causes so serious. I felt she was impertinent, but believed her rudeness to be the result of ‘fine-ladyism’—what you call flunkeyism, in short.”

“ I am wrong, perhaps, in differing from you,” said Brandreth ; “ but I must adhere to my opinion that there is positive love of giving pain in the conduct of some women to others of their own sex. It is very pleasant to rule, and there is scarcely one among you who would not ‘queen’ it, if she could. But whose is the fault if this love of power be fostered and increased ? Whose fault is it but theirs whose envy of the superior advantages of others gives those who are (or those who seem) above them the power to wound ?

“ When we consider, too, that by the laws of God and of society, every one must be placed both a little above and a

little below some one else, we may easily understand how wide a field is open for the indulgence of some of the worst feelings of our nature. There must be discontent where there is constant and invidious comparison, and where a restless desire to rival hinders the enjoyment of our own actual possessions. Believe me (but do not think, dear Alice, that my remark applies to you)—believe me that, till women can learn not to envy, they will always suffer from the insolence of their superiors in rank and fortune.”

“I am glad to be told,” said Alice, smiling, “that you were not talking at me. I do not think I feel envious in the way you speak of—I only—”

“Yes,” interrupted Arthur; “you only feel the mortification, for yourself and those you love, which any sensitive woman would endure under the circumstances you tell me of. But think you, dearest, that if women did not feel, such mortifications would be inflicted on them? Tell me if you believe that any one continues his endeavours to wound those that are proved invulnerable? Is the schoolboy tormented when he does not mind being laughed at? And would there be pleasure in criticising one whose vanity and pride were thick-skinned as the hide of a rhinoceros? You may laugh, but I shall convince you in time that it is the want of brave independent feeling in Englishwomen that is one great cause of their many discontents. If each one would look more closely to the performance of her own duties, and to the enjoyment of her own pleasures, and dwell less on the pursuits and amusements that are beyond her reach, her life would be a happier one, and the insolence of those you call ‘fine ladies’ would have less field for its exercise.”

“*Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien,*” said Alice, “in these cases as in so many others; and of that you certainly would have convinced me, had I doubted of the fact before. But you have not told me, dear Arthur, what is to be done for Marie; it is not good for her to be a constant witness of her mother's wearying anxiety, and besides, her health is suffering—she requires quiet and country air.”

“And you, like a devoted little Ruth as you are, would sacrifice yourself to the pleasures of others? I see it all, and I can think of only one way of assisting you in the oblation.”

“And what is that?” asked Alice, eagerly.

“That Marie should be asked to spend a few weeks with our old friend Mrs. Duncan. She would be near her brother, and it is right that they should now see more of each other than they have hitherto done. I will arrange it with Mrs. Duncan ; and you have only to obtain Lady Thornleigh’s consent, which I have little doubt will be readily granted.”

Alice was delighted to find so pleasant a remedy for the evil she had deplored ; and Marie, charmed with the thought of change, and overjoyed at the prospect of seeing her brother, departed from London with a light heart.

A few days after she had left them, an event occurred startling and distressing in the extreme to those long-tried women. The sisters were in their morning-room after breakfast—the one occupied in reading, and the other in writing letters—when they heard a ring, following by a shuffling in the passage, which denoted that something unusual had occurred. A minute elapsed : and then the serving-maid, entering in much haste and agitation, announced that “a person” was below, who insisted on speaking to Lady Thornleigh, and would take no denial.

“I told him that her ladyship was particularly engaged, but he would not believe me. I don’t know what he is, and he wouldn’t give a name nor a message.”

Gertrude and her sister looked at one another hesitatingly ; and while they did so, the door opened (not noisily, or as if pushed by an uncivil hand), and a man, respectably dressed and having the appearance of a tradesman, entered.

“Ave the kindness,” he said, addressing no one in particular, and looking purposeless enough—“Ave the kindness to *inform* me which of these ladies *his* Lady Thornleigh ?”

“I am Lady Thornleigh,” said Gertrude, quietly. “Have you any business with me, or would you be good enough to call again when our time may not be occupied ; for we are engaged now ?”

She showed by her manner that she wished to be relieved of the intruder’s presence, and so in truth she did—not from any fear of his especial business, at which she had not attempted to guess, but from an “unprotected female’s” natural dread of the male sex, when that sex is coarsely dressed, and takes liberties with its *h’s*.

“Very sorry, ma’am,” said the man, “but business *his* busi-

ness, and I must do mine. I 'ave a paper 'ere” (and he drew forth one that had hitherto been concealed); “it concerns you, ma'am, as you'll see :” whereupon he wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief, which was afterwards safely deposited in his hat.

Lady Thornleigh mechanically put out her hand to take the paper, but the man held it fast.

“It's a warrant, you see, ma'am—a warrant to arrest for bigamy, *hand* you're my prisoner !”

Lady Thornleigh neither shrieked nor fainted. Her life, from her early girlhood, had been so much one of sensation and nerve-racking excitement, that it seemed scarcely an effort for her to sit quite still, waiting for the worst.

Alice looked at her with surprise and consternation.

“Can she have been expecting this ?” was her inward question ; but one more glance at that haggard, anxious countenance showed her that the surprise was as overwhelming to her sister as to herself.

The “detective” stood before them in silence : his manner was not disrespectful, but it was decided ; and he had evidently made up his mind to be a fixture in their department for the present.

“Gertrude,” said Alice, in a whisper, “what does the man mean ? What can he want ? Surely he does not intend——?”

Lady Thornleigh put her sister gently from her, and with a dignity that the latter had never before seen her assume, she addressed their unwelcome visitor.

“I am totally at a loss,” she said “to imagine what has given rise to this mistake, for mistake it surely is. If you will allow me, I will write to a friend for advice and assistance, and in the mean time, you will perhaps wait below.”

“Beg pardon, ma'am, but it's against rules to lose sight of a prisoner.”

“Pray sit down then,” said Gertrude. “I am not very well—my head—Alice—help me !” and, with a shivering sigh, Lady Thornleigh fainted away.

The officer looked sorry and concerned, but he did not offer to leave the room, and stood twirling his hat between his hands, and staring at Alice, who, after laying her swooning sister on the sofa, endeavoured to restore her to consciousness. While busied on this work, the man's presence was forgotten ; but

as a faint tinge of colour returned to Gertrude's cheeks, and her quivering eyelids gave token of returning life, Alice remembered the cause of her sudden faintness, and turned imploringly towards the officer.

“Sir,” she said, “for the love of heaven, do not remain within my sister's sight. She is so ill and weak that, as you see, she cannot leave the room. Pray then give us time, and allow her a chance of recovery.”

The man scratched the back of his head irresolutely.

“Is there never a door but this 'ere one?” he asked.

“None. Convince yourself. I only wish you to wait outside, and allow me to write a letter to a friend.”

“You can write,” said the man, who was evidently touched by her distress, “but you mustn't lose no time; and if you'll give me a *cheer*, I'll stay outside.”

It was a relief to feel that she was alone with her sister; and even Gertrude, as she slowly came to herself, seemed to feel that their situation, distressing as it still was, had admitted of palliation.

“To whom shall I send?” asked Alice, as she approached the writing-table. “Arthur is not in London, nor do I know where he is. He should not have left us. You were safer at Kelhouet, and would to Heaven we had never left it!”

Lady Thornleigh could suggest nothing. She had no friends, she said, and had better submit to her fate. The momentary energy had passed away; and Alice saw, with deep regret, that her sister was sinking again into her normal state of hopeless depression.

“I must act for her,” was her thought; and drawing some paper towards her, she inscribed a few lines, containing an earnest appeal to one who, though unknown, she felt certain would exert himself in their defence. The note was addressed to “J. Paulett, Esq.,” and was directed to his club. In a few moments it was despatched by a sure messenger; and then the writer sat down to think over what she had done.

In the absence of him who seemed now their natural protector, she could think of no one as his substitute but the genial friend and valued adviser of her own Arthur. Often had the latter spoken to her of Johnnie's merits—of his warm-heartedness, his wit, and his worldly wisdom; and Alice, in her great embarrassment, could think of no better plan than to write and claim the services of Arthur's friend.

It was three o'clock when her missive was sent. She felt it would be wise to speak on that matter unreservedly to their gaoler ; and therefore she allowed him to calculate with her at what hour the messenger would return with an answer from Mr. Paulett.

“I'll wait till then,” said the man. “You see, miss, I can't bide 'ere half night. I'm hoverstepping my duty as it is.”

“Will you have some dinner ?” asked Alice. The idea was among the most sensible she had had that day, and so her visitor seemed to think, as he obligingly accepted the offer.

The meal occupied some time in its preparation, and then it had to be eaten, and the beer sent for and indulged in ; but when those pleasant occupations were over, the minion of the law began to show signs of impatience.

“This 'ere gen'l'man's a long time a-coming,” he remarked, as Alice for the twentieth time looked out from the door of the drawing-room to ascertain whether his patience were becoming exhausted. “*Hit's* four o'clock now,” he added, looking at a silver watch of marvellous dimensions, “and my man 'll be tired a waiting outside. Could I speak a word to him, miss ?”

At that moment the welcome sound of the door-bell was heard ; and Alice, leaning over the bannisters, saw with joy that a gentleman had been admitted into the passage. For a moment, and for the first time since she had sent her appeal to Paulett, she felt a sensation of shyness at the boldness of the deed ; but this transitory discomfort was at once dispelled when Johnnie, after hastily mounting the narrow stairs, greeted her with the warmth and gentlemanly familiarity of an old acquaintance.

“I have taken a great liberty, I fear,” began Alice, as she led her visitor into the drawing-room.

“I am very glad you did,” said Paulett, when, after shaking hands with Lady Thornleigh, he had made himself thoroughly at home in an armchair. “I came as soon as I could, but I never got your note till ten minutes ago ; and I had the slowest horse ! But now, tell me what all this is about. I have telegraphed for Arthur ; I did so as I came along.”

“I do not know where Mr. Brandreth is, or I would have saved you the trouble,” said Alice, timidly. The fact was, she felt rather curious on the subject of Arthur's absence ; and

Johnnie, seeing this, was mute as a fish so far as that topic was concerned.

“Till he arrives,” continued the wideawake visitor, “you must employ me, and allow me to put myself (as far as a poor man can worthily occupy a rich man’s shoes) in my friend Brandreth’s place. And now to business; for I suspect the gentleman outside understands that better than he does either pleasure or compliments.”

Lady Thornleigh took little part in the short conversation which ensued between her sister and her new acquaintance; and the latter, from the few remarks that did escape her, saw no great reason to change the opinion he had formed of that aggrieved lady’s merits. Of Alice, on the contrary, he would have said (and he did say afterwards to her betrothed), that “she was a dear little thing,” plucky, sensible, and straightforward, with quite beauty enough to make a man *spoony*, and with enough, and not too much, to say for herself.

It did not take many minutes to put Johnnie *au fait* of what had occurred, and fewer still to show him what were the best measures to take under the present trying circumstances. Beckoning the officer into another room, he was soon convinced by that functionary that they had no alternative but to allow the law to take its course. This being the case, it became necessary to rouse Lady Thornleigh’s sinking courage, and to prepare her to encounter the painful ordeal of a police-court examination.

“It will not be as bad as you expect,” said Paulett, encouraging the trembling woman, before whose excited imagination there passed visions of a prison, of turnkeys, and manacles, and God knows of what horrors besides. “We will take Gatherock with us, and it will be a case of bail, of course. The magistrate will consent to a private investigation (of that I have not the slightest doubt), and you will come home to dinner all right.”

Alice tied on her sister’s bonnet, and wrapped the shawl around her, for Gertrude could do nothing for herself; and then they almost carried her to the hired vehicle that was in waiting for them. The officer took his station on the box, and they were driven away.

All happened very much as Johnnie had foretold. Substantial bail was, through his assistance, procured and accepted for Lady Thornleigh’s reappearance; and when Brandreth re-

turned to London, which (not having received the message) he did not do till at a late hour on the following evening, he had only to listen with sorrow and astonishment to the recital of what had occurred during his absence. His first thought was for Edgar—of the possible blighting of all his young hopes, and of the terrible influence which such a bitter trial would probably have upon his character; for Brandreth had lately made acquaintance with the son of his old friend, and had sounded the depths of his nature well. Arthur had never spoken to Lady Thornleigh of her son; but now that the interests of that son were so deeply involved, he felt it his duty to break through the silence which both had maintained concerning him.

“I saw your boy a week ago, Lady Thornleigh,” said he, with a gentleness that an habitual consideration for woman’s weaknesses lends to a man’s manner. “He has grown a fine young man, intelligent, and gentlemanlike.”

“He was always that,” said his mother, in a low voice.

“Yes; but he is more than intelligent—for he is, for his age, far-seeing and deep-thinking; and there is much to approve of both in his sentiments and opinions. It is a satisfaction to feel this: for whatever may be the result of this attack upon his birthright, it is certain that there are rough waves for him and all of us to pass over before we can glide into quiet waters. Lady Thornleigh, you must immediately send for your son; for he ought not to be kept an hour in ignorance of all that you may have to impart to him.”

“It would be dreadful to see him now: I should be almost afraid, for he is strongly prejudiced, and it would be so hard to tell him of this last and greatest misfortune.”

“Which, in all probability, he knows already, for the rumour of evil flies fast. But you are mistaken in your belief that Edgar is prejudiced against his mother. I know but of one person against whom he appears to entertain a bitter and angry feeling, and that one, I regret to say, is Mrs. Vaughan: he will hardly bear to hear her name mentioned, and is indignant that she should be in any way mixed up with his family affairs. Of course, a great deal of this rancour is to be attributed to a natural jealousy of her position, as owner of the wealth that should by right (at least so Edgar thinks) have been his. It is a very complicated state of mind—much pride, much wounded affection for——” and he checked himself suddenly.

“For the memory of his father, you would say ; for, alas ! he has too little cause to love the mother who has worked him so much evil.”

Brandreth was too truthful to contradict her, and continued his remarks without heeding the interruption.

“I think if you were to see your son, and consult with him as friend with friend, many of our difficulties might be smoothed. If I mistake not, there is a spring of feeling yet unopened in the boy’s heart, which only requires a touch of yours to set it running.”

“My mother would not allow of our meeting ; my mother has always prejudiced him against me.”

“But Edgar’s first duty is to you, dear Gertrude,” said Alice ; “and were I in your place, I would claim that duty, and leave the rest to the workings of his own loving feelings towards you.”

“And so run the risk of losing for my poor impoverished son the favour and protection of the one relation whose wealth may benefit him ?” said Gertrude, almost reproachfully.

“My dear Lady Thornleigh,” broke in Arthur impatiently, “pray understand that Edgar has arrived at an age and is of a disposition to judge for himself. He is not a mere thoughtless boy, but one who, I am convinced, has already made up his mind how to act in the various chances that may befall him. In the mean time let Alice write to him, and do you (while bearing in mind the misfortunes which threaten him) excuse, if you can, the faults that are a portion of his inheritance.”

The last few words were addressed to Alice ; for Lady Thornleigh had (as was her frequent custom) left the room in tears.

“If we could but give her courage,” said the patient sister ; “if only she would appreciate some of the compensations that have been made to her, she would be better able to bear suspense, and to endure great afflictions when they come.”

“We will see what Edgar’s presence will do for her,” said Brandreth, cheerfully. “The sight of his almost-forgotten sister has been of infinite service to young Thornleigh, and I suspect that he has begun to feel himself misplaced in the midst of Plenty and Parade, while those who should be near as well as dear to him are in a position so different. It is an incongruous sight, that long banqueting-room at the Hall, with the large

lady covered with lace and gauds at one end of the table, and that fair slight boy opposite to her. She likes the ‘young baronet’ well, but I almost doubt her valuing him so much when she hears that his legitimacy is to become the question for a public trial. In the meanwhile, dearest, do you write to the poor boy, and tell him that warm hearts at home are wishing for and expecting him. Write with all your eloquence, and I am convinced that we shall soon have him among us.”

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### CHAPTER XXX.

“Ere the sun through heaven once more has rolled,  
The rats in her heart  
Will have made their nest,  
And the worms be alive in her golden hair.  
\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*  
She shall sleep !”

SHELLEY.

IT is some time since the course of our narrative has led us to where Helen (in the belief that she is doing her woman’s mission) is supporting the tottering steps of a weak and failing sister, as she approaches the dark valley where death’s shadow rests.

Rhoda’s condition has altered but little since we took our temporary leave of her a month ago ; but a pleasant ray of sunshine is gilding her kind friend’s path, and in that ray the now patient girl can also sun herself.

One day a foreign letter was given to Mrs. Vaughan ; it had followed her from London, and was dated Suez. This letter imparted a piece of intelligence to the receiver, which,

though far from giving her unmixed satisfaction, had the effect of bringing a brighter look upon her usually serious face.

“What news have you received, dear Mrs. Vaughan?” asked Rhoda. “Something happy, I am sure?”

“Very happy,” answered Helen; “a dear friend and cousin I have not seen for years is coming home from India. He writes to say that in a week I may expect him. Nay, dear child, do not look anxious and alarmed. I shall not leave you; there will be no change.”

“No change but death,” said the girl, in a low tone; but at that moment the invalid looked so brightly beautiful, that Helen could scarcely believe how soon that change must come.

When the day approached for the arrival of the “heavy portion” of the Indian mails, Mrs. Vaughan (leaving Rhoda in the charge of an attentive nurse) betook herself to Southampton. She had not long to wait; for the voyage had been so prosperous that not many hours after her arrival the great Oriental steamer slowly neared the port.

Helen scanned the passengers as they landed and hurried on to the hotels or to the houses of their friends. There were sickly faces and worn bodies among that rather ghastly crew, but none whom Helen thought could by any possibility be identified with her long-absent relative. At last, disappointed and tired, she returned to her hotel in the High Street, declaring to herself that she had been a fool to come—a fool to expect that any dear relation would ever take her by the hand again, and determining that by the first steamer in the morning she would return to her friend and to her duties.

As she was retiring for the night, and while traversing a long passage that led to her bedroom, the name on a trunk by a closed door arrested her attention, and she stopped for a moment looking at it. While thus engaged, the door opened, and a tall middle-aged man passing out, Helen, though wonderfully, recognized in him her cousin.

It is hardly possible for even a few years to elapse between the meetings of dear friends, and some pang not be felt in the change we note in them; but when Helen Langton saw again the companion of her childhood, no less than five-and-twenty winters had been added to their sum of life. No wonder therefore that, looking at him, she could scarcely believe him to be the same.

“That is the trunk—take it to No. 45,” he said.

“*Number forty-five!*” his age ; and the coincidence, childish as it may seem, struck Helen as curious. He walked on, and not seeing her, she followed him along the passage. His head was somewhat bald, and his hair thickly sprinkled with grey ; his figure was spare as ever, and his shoulders slightly rounded —altogether he looked older than his age, and had the bearing of one whose life had not been exempt either from ill-health or anxiety.

The man who bore the trunk (and it was a large one) set it down inside the door of No. 45, and walked away with a sigh of relief ; then the owner of that trunk would doubtless have shut himself in to enjoy his first sleep in England, had not his purpose been arrested by one who stood, with a face half smiles and half tears, between him and the door.

She had followed him, in the hope that the almost-dreaded first meeting would pass off better so, than in the greater formality of a mere conventional mode of proceeding ; but the result hardly justified her expectations.

“Edward !” she cried, “I see you do not know me ; I am your cousin Helen. Speak to me, won’t you, after all these years ?”

The grave-looking man gazed at her in surprise ; and then, deliberately setting down his candle, took both her hands in his.

“Helen Langton !” he exclaimed ; “and you ask me if I will speak to you ? Why, you are almost all I have come home for—my only relation, my sister, my dear, dear friend !” and, drawing her arm through his, he led her back to the sitting-room she had left.

On Helen and her cousin the effect of time had told with amazing difference. The former, at forty-two, seemed in the meridian of her beauty ; there was not a line of silver in her shining hair, nor a wrinkle on her smooth cheek ; while Edward looked already almost old, and his manner added to the impression his appearance made. They did not remain long together —long enough, however, to make each feel that they had met again with a long-lost friend ; and then, without a syllable from Burrowes that showed the past had been remembered, and without the utterance of a word bordering on “sentiment,” they said “Good-night.”

Helen was rather disappointed, and yet she could hardly tell

why. Perhaps it was because the Edward Burrowes of her youth—the chivalrous, half-sentimental, reverencing boy—was as extinct in the middle-aged Doctor as if he had never existed! Or was it that, in looking at his face, on which the years of nearly half a century had set their seal, she had become disagreeably aware that a similar change might be visible in herself?

That night, as Helen lay in her bed, she took herself seriously to task. “My youth has passed away,” she said to herself; “and the remains of the beauty, of which I know I have been vain, must soon be among the things that were. Shall I be content to grow old, without a pang of regret for the admiration I have prized? And shall I ever be able to give myself up, heart and soul as well as body, to the work I have to do? I mistrust my motives, I see vanity and self-love in all my deeds, and bitterly feel how soon our lessons in the knowledge of ourselves are forgotten.”

Thus Helen Langton mused, as she lay restless on her bed. The sight of her cousin (of that worn and altered man) had taught her one lesson more in the often dearly-bought wisdom that should come with years. “There is a time for all things,” she murmured to herself; “a time for youth—a time for——” But here she closed her eyes, and slept.

In her dreams she was a girl again, and Edward Burrowes (he was young too, and fresh of heart) was sitting by her side under the walnut-tree, and the day was hot, and her cousin fanned her with peacock’s feathers as she looked and smiled at him.

It had been arranged between the cousins when they met (and be it remembered that of old times little had been said by either), that in the course of a week Dr. Burrowes should follow Helen to Brading, and there remain with her on a visit. There was much satisfaction to Mrs. Vaughan in the thought that she would not be alone with her dying charge, but would, on the contrary, have one to assist her whose medical knowledge, and experience of almost every phase of suffering, would be constantly available in time of need.

Rhoda was decidedly and evidently weaker when Mrs. Vaughan, after an absence of a night and a day, returned to Brading. The medical man enjoined perfect quiet, insisting especially on the patient not being permitted to talk: therefore it was not from the sufferer’s lips, but from those of her

faithful attendant, that Helen learnt the immediate cause of poor Rhoda's increased illness.

“Twas the sight of two gentlemen, ma'am (I can't think it was anything else), that made Miss Mason take on so. We were walking, as it might be if you'd been here yourself, ma'am, when they came by. One was an oldish gentleman, and the other young and stylish-looking. I felt Miss Mason's arm shake, but we couldn't avoid meeting them ; so we went slowly on. They stared at her quite rudely, ma'am, and I felt as angry as could be. But that wasn't all, for they turned round and followed us, as if to find out where we lived ; and Miss Mason, she hurried on, and her poor breath came short, and when we got to the house her handkerchief was in a gore of blood.”

“Did you ask who the gentlemen were ?” said Helen.

“I did not, ma'am ; but I heard Robert say the yacht they belong to was the *Curlew*, and I saw the name on the men's hats myself.”

Helen understood what had happened now; for the *Curlew* was the beautiful cutter belonging to Sir Hugh Lorton ; and on board of her poor Rhoda, in her palmy days, had taken many a short but joyous cruise.

It was no marvel that the sick girl, stung to the quick at the sight of her former lover's coldness, should in her weakened state have suffered so severely. Helen was very indignant with the heartless men who had thus distressed her dying charge, but she was still more angry with herself for having left her post ; and so, after writing at once to her cousin, begging him to hasten his coming, she took her place at the sick girl's pillow, resolving no more to quit it till death should have claimed his prey.

It had been a perfectly breezeless day—the sea was like a mirror, and not a sail could move along the water. Oppressed by the heat within doors, Helen, as it grew dark, took a few turns in the small garden, which was only separated by a hedge of sweetbriar from the road, and, to her surprise, she perceived standing near two gentlemen, who were engaged in rather eager conversation.

“I am sure this was the house,” said one ; “but I must find out, as Katie will be furious if I have nothing to tell her.”

“Leave it to me,” said the other man. “And now, all things considered, I think that you had better make yourself scarce ; for I know Mrs. Vaughan, and she wouldn't like her house to

be besieged in this way. Send back the boat for me—I'll come on board later.”

“Mr. Paulett!” exclaimed Helen, the moment the last speaker was alone,—“Mr. Paulett, I am surprised to see you here. Surely you cannot know that Rhoda Mason lies dying in this house?”

“I am sorry you think me so completely out of place in such a scene,” said Paulett, “but I dare say I deserve it; for we are all heartless brutes, and think little enough of others' sufferings. On this occasion, however, I am sent by a woman. Katie Reilly's here, in Pershore's yacht.”

“Lord Pershore!—that coarse, drunken, odious man?”

“The very same. The best plums are not for everybody, so Katie has pulled out this one—good girl as she is. *I can't help it, Mrs. Vaughan; don't look angry with me.*”

“No, you can't help it, perhaps, but I wish you wouldn't turn everything into a joke.”

“*Le cœur se brise ou se bronze.* I will tell you *my* interesting little story some day, and you will see that I too had a heart of flesh in my youth. But tell me, is this poor girl so very ill?”

“As ill as possible. Her life may be prolonged for a few days, but that is as much as we can either hope or expect.”

“I hardly thought her case so hopeless; nor did Katie, who has set her heart upon seeing her. What am I to say to that determined young woman? Very likely she won't believe me, but will come and reconnoitre for herself.”

“You must tell Mrs. Reilly that she lost her opportunity, and that now it is too late.”

“But if Rhoda should rally—if she should express a wish to see her old friend?”

“Give me Katie's address, and in that case I will send to her.”

“She is at Cowes; Pershore has a cottage there.”

“Is Sir Hugh Lorton always with them?”

“Not always; he takes a cruise sometimes, and you know that Katie——”

“Don't tell me anything about them. There is something inexpressibly shocking in hearing of such things, when the girl they have killed is struggling for breath in that room upstairs. Come and see her, Johnnie,” added Helen, moved by a sudden impulse. “There is nothing shocking in the

sight, but it is one to make the most world-hardened pause and ponder.”

But Paulett could not be induced to distress himself by the unnecessary sight of a depressing spectacle.

“If I could do her any good,” he said; “but as I cannot, I shall say good-night. God bless you! I am very sorry for all this.” And he hurried away.

The next day Dr. Burrowes arrived at Brading. His opinion agreed with that of the regular medical attendant; and he moreover added, that if the patient wished any of her friends to be written to, her desire should be complied with without delay.

“You will let me write to your father, dear Rhoda?” said Helen. “Say yes, and tell me his address.”

Rhoda complied at once (for death was too near to be trifled with now), and a telegraphic message was at once sent off to the Rev. David Falconer, Vicar of \_\_\_\_\_. Twelve hours elapsed, and then a carriage, with an elderly gentleman inside, stopped at the little cottage. Helen went to the gate to meet him.

“She is alive and conscious!” she said.

“Thank God! then I have not come too late. Can I see her?”

Helen preceded him upstairs. “This way,” she whispered; “there is an old friend with her, but she is going immediately.”

At that moment the door of the sick-room opened, and a young woman, with a handkerchief at her eyes, came out. The clergyman took her place, and the door closed upon him.

“Good-bye, dear Mrs. Vaughan,” sobbed Katie. “I am glad I have seen her; she is happier than any of us.”

“And where are you going now, my poor girl?”

“Home.”

“Home! Surely not to the one—”

“May I stay with you to-night?” broke in Katie, abruptly.

“May you? Yes, this will be your home for life, if you wish it; you have but to say the word.”

“How good you are!” said the girl, as she sat down, and cried bitterly; while Mrs. Vaughan, hoping they were healing drops, let her weep on unheeded.

We will draw a veil over the last scene of deepest interest, when the daughter wept tears of repentance on her father’s breast, and he, forgiving her, mingled his tears with hers. After

the interview Rhoda became slightly delirious, but there was peace even in her wanderings ; and when, towards evening, the cloud that obscured her reason passed away, she once more asked for Katie.

The weeping girl bent over her, and kissed her tenderly.

“Katie,” murmured Rhoda, “this is not *your* bright face ? We shall meet again, shall we not, dear ? I can hardly see you. Kiss me again, and try to be good. Say a prayer, Katie—say ‘Our Father——’”

The voice had grown gradually weaker, then ceased altogether ; there were a few struggling sighs, and Rhoda had ceased to breathe.

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

“Conscia mens recti, famæ mendacia ridet.”—OVID.

“Chi vuol vada, chi non vuol mandi.”—ITAL. PROV.

THE news of the impending trial was, as may be imagined, a fearful blow to Edgar Thornleigh. He at once hastened to London, and having arrived there, the first person he sought was Arthur Brandreth. That friend was, as usual, clear-sighted and judicious ; and so tenderly did he deal with the young spirit struggling against the blast of adversity, that after a few hours' conference concerning the painful particulars, and business details of the question at issue, the young man's countenance cleared. Brandreth marked the change, but could scarcely understand why the clouds had so suddenly rolled from that young brow, leaving it bright as a summer sky. The mystery was, however, explained when, an hour after, they sat in consultation in Gatherock's chambers.

That shrewd lawyer had carefully examined every document, and looked over every paper that had been submitted to him, and was obliged again to pronounce that the case was an unpromising one.

Edgar listened in silence. It was only that morning that many a particular connected with the family history had been confided to him ;—only that morning that he had understood all that the wicked passions of his father's cousin had prompted her to attempt. He had made few comments, but his cheek was flushed, and his eyes were fixed and thoughtful.

“And this is all,” said Gatherock, “positively all the evidence that Lady Thornleigh can produce of Considine’s death!—a letter from a man of whom we know nothing, and who had so much to gain by deceiving her?”

Brandreth looked at Edgar, but, to his surprise, saw no signs of despondency in his young friend’s face.

“There is one course that might be pursued,” continued the lawyer, “and that is to prove the illegality of the first marriage; in that case——”

But Edgar interrupted him with a concentrated anger that was surprising in one who looked so young and gentle.

“Never, sir!” he said; “my father and my mother first, and then come what may to me! Pray,” he added, recovering himself, and speaking almost beseechingly, “pray, do not give up the case! Let it go on, however small may be the proof my mother has. I am not afraid of poverty, and I do not care for the possession of Thornleigh Abbey; but I do value my mother’s good name, and my father’s wishes are sacred to me!”

He stopped: for, with all the sensitiveness of the boy he still was, he feared to be overcome before witnesses, and dreaded to show the tears that were so near his eyelids. After a few moments, therefore, of choking emotion, he rose and left the room.

“That is a fine young fellow,” said Gatherock, as the heavy door closed upon him. “I wish we could pull him through this business. There is very little we can do, I fear. We can advertise; but as this troublesome customer most probably died abroad, I suspect that will be of little avail. Perhaps the man Peters might come over from the enemy, on whose side I suppose he is; but where is the fellow?—does any one know?”

“God knows!” said Brandreth. “I can ask the person who

first told us he was in Australia, but it is hardly probable that she will have anything to tell.”

“Ask her,” said Gatherock, “for we can’t afford to throw away a chance. In the mean time I will cause advertisements to be drawn up and inserted, and will send a confidential messenger (as we before agreed) to Havannah, to ascertain if there be any truth in the report of Considine’s death in Cuba at the time when that event was announced to Lady Thornleigh.”

Satisfied that the affair was in good hands, Arthur returned to Lady Thornleigh’s house, and there, to his infinite satisfaction, he found Edgar, looking calm and happy, by his mother’s sofa, while one of her hands was clasped in his. It was pleasant to see the change that had come over Lady Thornleigh’s countenance as she looked at her son ; and as Arthur noted it, a thought for himself stole pleasantly over his mind.

“Alice,” he whispered, as they sat together a little apart, “there will be happiness in this house now; is it not time then that you should think a little of me, and of the home you have promised to share ?”

“After the trial, dear Arthur,” said Alice, “and when the world will know that your wife has not shared the home of a sister who is unworthy of your respect.”

“But that may be months hence, for the trial will probably be put off till the spring assizes.”

“If it be we must have patience, for Gertrude will require all my care : she looks happy now, but she is certain to suffer after any excitement, even though that excitement be a happy one.”

Brandreth ceased to urge her, and tried to look contented ; but he must be forgiven if, in the innermost recesses of his mind, he could not quite pardon the rather exacting elder sister to whom he owed his disappointment.

Meanwhile Helen had returned to London, and had learned the fresh calamity by which Lady Thornleigh was threatened. She could not bring herself to feel only regret at what at first sight appeared so alarming ; for here was the opportunity, so long waited for, of throwing a light on the mystery of Lady Thornleigh’s conduct ; and that done, the dearest wish of Philip’s heart would at last be satisfied.

But what then ? Could she give back to them the wealth of which they had been deprived ? And was it in her power

to make them forget, by her abandonment of Philip's fortune, the injustice he had done them? Alas! these were questions which Helen could not answer in the affirmative; and for the hundredth time she mourned in bitter sorrow and self-reproach over the loss of that precious volume, which, her conscience told her, she should not have lost sight of for a moment.

Brandreth visited Helen on the evening following Edgar's arrival in London, and, as usual, mutual confidences passed between them. Arthur was especially sympathizing in the matter of the missing treasure.

“Is Turner still alive?” he asked, “and has he retained his memory? He must be a very old man now.”

“Very old, but his intellects are quite clear. I see him often, for he lives with his daughter, who is a dressmaker in Ebury Street. I have often spoken to him about the volume, but he can give no account of it.”

“What kind of book was it?” asked Brandreth.

“It was a beautifully bound and illustrated copy of the ‘Faëry Queen,’ ” answered Helen; “the colour purple morocco, with a good deal of gilding on it. I should recognize it in a moment.”

“And unless it be found, you must be a rich woman. I cannot with any show of reason call you ‘poor Helen,’ though you are bemoaning your loss so heavily,” said Arthur, with a half-smile.

“And to think that they won't take the income!” exclaimed Helen. “It seems so hard; it is the cruellest punishment they could have dealt me!”

“Don't say *they*, for it is only Edgar who is refractory; but there is a stubborn pride about that boy which nothing seems able to conquer!”

Helen sighed. “Poor fellow!” she remarked; “he is Philip's son, and I can understand something of what he feels. But, Arthur, will you have the kindness to tell me what I am to do with all the money I have saved? Thousands upon thousands are lying by untouched; and if I could but employ them for the benefit of Philip's family, I should indeed be happy.”

“I see no reason,” replied Arthur, “why in one way you should not expend some of your hundreds upon our poor friends. The law expenses will be considerable, and between us we will meet them: whatever remains you can, if you feel inclined, embark in my *human* speculation,” added he, smiling.

“Your *humane* speculation rather,” said Helen. “But I must go to Wanthorpe to see all you are doing there, and learn from you how I also can be of use. But now will you tell me when you are to see Katie? I fear, however, that she will know nothing of that dreadful man, and——By the bye, where is she? I have been so busy since my return that I have almost forgotten her.”

“Katie has grown a tremendous swell. Old Pershore has taken a house for her in Curzon Street, and has given her a pair of the prettiest ponies in London.”

“I was afraid how it would be,” said Mrs. Vaughan, sadly; “there is no chance for Katie while she has health and spirits.”

“And is so pretty and engaging,” added Arthur. “But do you think there is any worth or merit in the offering of the devil’s leavings? I confess that I do not, and never could.”

“If we are to believe the Bible,” said Helen, solemnly, “we may hope that it is hardly ever too late to repent. But do you believe the Bible?” asked she, with sudden energy. “I sometimes fear you don’t.”

“Faith is a gift,” answered Arthur; “and I cannot tell you that blind belief is among the blessings that Providence has bestowed upon me.”

“How very lamentable! how grievous!” cried Helen. “I hardly expected, though I half feared that I should not be answered in the affirmative.”

“I wish to believe,” said Arthur, not noticing her exclamation, “and I endeavour to act as though I do believe. I rather think with Pope (though I am far from considering myself as an illustration of the remark), that ‘He can’t be wrong whose life is in the right.’ After all,” continued he, “we have nothing but the Holy Scriptures as a guiding-staff; so, not to do as we are told in them is, to say the least of it, throwing away a chance.”

“And is that all that you can say—you, to whom I have looked up as to one of those sent to guide others by their example?”

“He who endeavours to do his duty to his neighbour has (according to my idea) the surest likelihood of doing his duty to his God. But do not talk of my example, for I fail signally and fearfully in my efforts to do right. Even now, when seeking to obtain the evidence for Lady Thornleigh, my conscience

tells me that I am guided almost entirely by my own selfish passions, and——”

“It would never do to analyze motives too closely, I fear,” interrupted Helen; “but I believe that yours are as pure as most men’s.”

“Thank you for your good opinion, which I heartily wish to deserve,” said Arthur, as he wished her good night, and left her to think regretfully on their conversation.

The next morning, according to the lawyer’s advice, Brandreth called early on Mrs. Reilly, and found her at home.

He began at once on the subject that brought him there:

“Do you,” he said, “know anything of the man who used to be the companion of Juan Considine?”

“Not a word; and I doubt Considine doesn’t either.”

“Do you ever see that young fellow now?”

“I do,” said Katie; “he’s hard up, and has got a wife and child.”

“Could you ask him if he has heard lately of Peters?”

“I could, but I wouldn’t like to send to him, because of his wife. I’ll try and see him, but it’s just a chance if I can, and it’s not so easy to find him, anyway.”

“But where does he live, and how?” asked Arthur.

“He lives in a poor street; and I met him one day by chance in the Park, in a coat that wasn’t fit to be seen in, and I brought him back to dinner, poor fellow!”

“And I suppose that you have often seen him since,” said Arthur, “and have helped him to live?”

“Not at all. He’s very poor, but he won’t take money; and his grandfather at L—— won’t give him anything because he’s married a Protestant, and I got a friend of mine to give him some work to do—that’s all.”

“Well, Katie, I see I may trust to your asking him the question. Let me know the answer as soon as you can. The Club address will find me.”

Two days later Brandreth heard from Katie that she had questioned her former lover, who averred that Peters was still in Australia. He had heard from him not many weeks before, and had every reason to believe that his worthy correspondent had journeyed some distance into the interior.

Arthur pondered long on this piece of information, and at last decided on consulting his friend Paulett as to what had better be his next move.

It was now the beginning of August, and London was emptying fast. Johnnie was still hanging about, looking in upon his Club in the intervals between his country excursions, and ready as ever to be useful and entertaining.

“Ah! there is old Pershore,” said he, as, with Arthur’s arm linked within his, they sauntered by the “Row” side, passing the carriages and equestrians in review. Their attention was especially drawn to a low phaeton driven by a lady, the *attelage* of which (in their “rampagious ferocity”) it seemed only just within the driver’s power to manage. Close to the carriage and talking to the lady, who had reined up her steeds, was the individual alluded to by Paulett.

“Look at him,” cried the latter—“every inch a *belted* earl! By Jove, how well he’s got up!”

“I heard he was in the Highlands,” said Brandreth.

“Not he! He prefers chasing the wild *dears* and following the *Row* in these diggings. But here he comes, with his trot *à la militaire*! How are you?” and he nodded to the well-preserved General as he passed.

“A happy mixture of the civil and military,” said Arthur, in allusion to the peculiar “salute” affected by his lordship.

“Yes, Katie calls him the ‘Golden Mean,’ and she’s right; for he’s as rich as a Jew, and as great a screw as there is in existence. But, talking of Katie, were you not telling me that she said that fellow you want to find is in Australia?”

“Yes, and we must try and get hold of him.”

“Send Edgar Thornleigh out.”

“He’s too young, but I’ve more than half a mind to go myself.”

“On a wild-goose chase after a rascal who most likely has been hung under one of his dozen *aliases* long ago! Hallo! there’s Wraxham; he looks as cocky as if he’d already got possession of Thornleigh. I wish people would cut that fellow!”

“It would be ‘cut and come again,’ for he’d join together if he were cut in two like a worm, and wriggling at both ends. But I must go now and talk over this Australian project with Alice.”

“I suspect you’ll have some trouble there, and I wish you well through it,” said Johnnie, as they went their different ways to their different pleasures.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

“*Nec sibi, sed toto genitum se credere mundo.*”—LUCAN.

“THAT is a remarkable character,” said Dr. Burrowes one day to his cousin. They were talking of Brandreth, between whom and the clever army-surgeon there had already sprung up a mutual liking which promised to ripen into friendship. “I like him, and thoroughly appreciate his motives; while I confess to a feeling approaching to envy of his power to carry out his views.”

“You would have done very much as Mr. Brandreth has,” said Helen, “if you had been born rich as he is.”

“Very possibly, and indeed most probably not,” said Burrowes. “It is the warmth that brings out the adder, and prosperity might have been against my doing even the little good which in my life I have been able to effect.”

“Mr. Brandreth and I often talked of you, Edward, while you were in India; and when you were mentioned in the despatches—”

“Pshaw! mentioned in despatches for only doing one’s duty! But it was a hard time, and we were all obliged to exert ourselves. I saw some unpleasant sights during that war, Helen, and some that I shall not easily forget; but, upon my soul! few things have made a greater impression on me than some of the scenes which your friend introduced me to yesterday.”

“Ah!” said Helen, “I can readily believe it; for I suppose you went with him to some of those miserable parts of London to cleanse out which is one of the great aims and objects of Arthur’s life.”

“And a noble and Christian one it is!” exclaimed Burrowes. “I confess that I had no previous idea that almost within a stone’s throw of a palace, and of ‘lordly homes,’ there should

be such sties of human creatures wallowing in filth and wickedness.”

“It is a frightful reflection,” said Helen, “and a frightful sight ; and had I not seen something of it (for I, too, went with Arthur once), I could hardly have conceived the existence of such places.”

“They are perfect hotbeds of crime,” continued Dr. Burrowes ; “the very air is redolent of vice, and the children drink in curses with their mother’s milk. When I think how carefully the rich guard their little sons and daughters from the hearing of even a coarse expression, I ask myself how they can wonder if the unhappy children who hear nothing but words of wickedness should grow in vileness as they grow in years ?”

“And as Mr. Brandreth says,” rejoined Helen, “if the outward embellishments and adorning of our city were thought of less, and the demolishing of those ‘wasps’ nests’ (as he calls them) more, we should, perhaps, not have to blush so often for our country when we read the annals of her children’s crimes.”

“We will go, dear Helen, with him to Wanthorpe, and see how his good work progresses there. He is very anxious about its well-doing, and has paid me the compliment of wishing me to take the place of superintendent during his long absence. I shall be rejoiced to act in so good a cause.”

It had not required much thought on the subject to convince Arthur Brandreth that it was his duty to undertake the tedious journey of the probable results of which his friend Paulett spoke so disparagingly. Alice was the first to receive the intelligence of his intended absence, and her conduct on the occasion was characterized by her usual gentle self-abnegation.

It was in this wise that his purpose was broken to her.

“You have heard something new,” she said, when, after his walk with Johnnie, he paid her his threatened visit. “I am sure you have ; I see it in your face.”

“You are right,” answered Arthur : “for I have just heard, as an almost certainty, that Peters is still in Australia ; and the information is of importance, because on him rests almost our only hope of obtaining additional evidence in your sister’s favour. The person who told me this has had letters from Australia, and by them it appears that your sister’s son is

still living, and is doubtless in the power of the rascally Peters.”

“What a fate! and so far away from any that would protect him! Arthur, is it not shocking that he should be left there?”

“Very shocking. And putting all considerations together, and among them (and that not the least) your deep feeling on the subject, I can venture to tell you, dearest Alice, that I have determined to go immediately to Australia, and search for Peters and for your sister’s son.”

“You, Arthur! Can you really mean it?” exclaimed Alice, turning pale, as in the rapid flash of thought she saw the white waves foaming, and the thousands of miles intervening between herself and him.

“Alice, my darling,” he said, drawing her tenderly towards him, “I would not leave you, be sure of that, did I not clearly see my duty in this matter. Everything must be done to clear up the painful mystery; and I should bitterly reproach myself were I to leave one stone unturned beneath which a truth might lie.”

“But the trial will be so long postponed, and Gertrude will have no one to support her! Sometimes I fear that the waiting and suspense will kill her.”

“Do not have any fears on that score,” said Brandreth. “Lady Thornleigh will not be the worse for having something to think about; and a certain amount of stir in the atmosphere of her existence will act upon her mind like a tonic. You will be at hand to watch over and advise her, and I have no fear but that, on my return, I shall find you both brave in spirit and strong in health, ready also for the duties and, I trust, for the great happiness that is in store for us.”

“I will do my best,” said poor Alice, with an effort at resignation; “but, Arthur, you will not surely go alone? Is there no friend willing to accompany you on your distant journey? If only I were your wife——” And she stopped suddenly while a deep blush coloured her pale cheeks.

“Hush!” said Brandreth (and his breath came short and thick), “do not tempt me. This is a sacred duty—a duty to a suffering fellow-creature, and to the memory of my dead friend. I must go forth unshackled to this duty, and it is possible that its faithful fulfilment may be accepted as an expiation for many an error of my early life. Nay, darling, do not weaken my

resolution by the sight of your tears.” And as he spoke, he kissed them from the long lashes they were moistening. “We have, I hope, a happy future before us ; and if it should prove otherwise, why, we shall have done what is right in parting now, and”—he added more for her comfort than his own—“we may hope to meet in a happier world above.”

There is little use in dwelling upon the arrangements that preceded Arthur’s departure. From the moment that the project became known to Edgar, he determined to accompany his friend. Lady Thornleigh was decidedly against this measure, and endeavoured, but in vain, to persuade her son that it was his duty to remain as, in some sort, the protector of his family, but her efforts were in vain.

“I have a brother,” he said, in reply to her remonstrances, “who is helpless and forlorn ; and in my opinion, dear mother, his need for protection and care is far greater than either yours or Marie’s.”

“But, Edgar,” said Lady Thornleigh, “you do not know what that brother is. Spare yourself, dear boy ; and oh ! spare me the thought that you will see that hapless creature ! Surely Mr. Brandreth will be sufficient ? He is so energetic, so equal to any emergency, and——”

“Mother, you do but waste your words,” interrupted Edgar. “It would be an act of the blackest ingratitude were I to allow that kind friend to go alone on this expedition ; and we should not in that case deserve to prosper.”

Lady Thornleigh was silenced ; but, though apparently convinced by her son’s arguments, she continued to brood a little resentfully over her maternal failure.

Before their departure, a day was fixed by Helen for the visit to Brandreth’s “Folly,” as some called the home he had established for the poor at Wanthorpe. Arthur’s fortune was large both in lands and money ; and circumstances, to which we need not now revert, having early aroused him to a sense of the heavy responsibility of riches, he devoted a portion of his time to the discovery of the where, and in what country, there existed among the poor the greatest need of the benefits which wealth could bestow.

After a long and patient search, his mind was made up, and he returned to his native country, convinced that it was there, and among her poorest children, that his exertions should be made.

A large proportion of Arthur Brandreth's landed property lay in the same county as the estates of Thornleigh. The “Home” itself was about twenty miles from the Abbey, and was situated in a rich and fertile country. Arthur had expended large sums of money in the undertaking, from which he was sanguine enough to look for the most beneficial results; nor was he without a hope of inducing some of those who have it in their power to do good service for the poor, to follow the example he had set them.

There were many who considered Brandreth almost in the light of a madman. Some pitied him; while others blamed him for what, in their ignorance both of his views and motives, they called a leaning towards Socialism, and to that mischievous advocacy of “equal rights” which is so fraught with danger to the “higher classes.”

But whatever might be the various opinions concerning the projects and political views of Brandreth, the sight of his great work was one calculated to interest deeply all who came to visit it. The buildings connected with it were very numerous and of various kinds and dimensions. In fact, the place bore the appearance of a large and straggling village, situated in the midst of trees and gardens; and there was about it a look of busy and prosperous industry that was pleasant to behold. Brandreth and his friends spent several hours inspecting the works that were being carried on, and in making themselves acquainted with the machinery by which all was done so regularly and so well.

There was much farm-work being executed by active young lads, whose labour was well remunerated, but who were obliged to work hard for the good pay they gained. There were young girls plying their needles busily, and many of them learning fresh trades, and new and profitable ways by which they might both earn and save. But the great and leading feature in the place was the children. Of these there were at least two hundred, of various ages and of both sexes. Some (the very little ones) were still in their cradles or in the arms of nurses; but the elder ones were either at the schools, or being, as was the case with the young girls, taught some useful calling.

“But the cost of this must be something enormous,” said Burrowes as, their inspection being over, they sat down to rest in the hut (as Arthur called it) that was devoted to his especial

use during his visits to Wanthurpe. “It seems almost incredible that the exertions and sacrifices of one individual should have been capable of producing such vast results.”

“Nor have they,” said Brandreth: “for the contributions I have received from the rich and charitable have almost put me in good humour with human nature. I have found that, out of ‘the world,’ the numbers of those who only require to know how and where to give is immense. I am forbidden by most of these good Samaritans to proclaim their names abroad; but the monument to their charity and excellence is here, and is a nobler testimonial than any of those pompous ones, which the mistaken zeal of friends and admirers raise as memorials to the distinguished dead.”

“But,” said Helen, “will this last; and can you reckon on the continual aid of those who have shown themselves in the beginning so willing to help you? Many will be liberal in a glow of enthusiasm, or under the excitement of a new field for charity; but I fear that the number of those who will steadily pursue a good purpose will be found far smaller.”

“True,” said Arthur; “but I am sanguine enough to believe that my establishment may become in time self-supporting—nay, even pay me a ‘dividend,’ ” added he, with a smile; “for, whatever Dr. Burrowes may imagine, I am by no means an advocate for a community of goods and for the equalization of classes. I have sunk a capital of 100,000*l.* in this concern, to say nothing of the large extent of valuable land which is given up for the buildings and farming operations connected with them. But I have no idea of not utilizing all the labour I have brought together, and time will show whether I have made bad ‘affairs,’ or not.”

He spoke lightly: but Helen thought she saw a deeper motive through his *persiflage*, and felt that he was endeavouring to draw a veil over the noble motives by which he had been actuated.

“The time when it would be advisable for rich people to visit your refuge,” said Dr. Burrowes, “would be immediately after an inspection of some of the dens of misery and infamy, of the horrors of which (by personal observation at least) they knew so little. The force of contrast must tell; and who is there that notes the difference, but must feel for those rescued children that it is ‘good for them to be here’?”

“But will it persuade one of those prosperous ones to make

a personal sacrifice ? ” asked Helen. “ And will it induce one great landed proprietor, as he stands in the midst of his far-spreading park (that wide domain that ministers only to his own vanity)—will it, I ask, induce one such fortunate wealth-possessor to look into the depths of his own heart, and say, ‘ I am the man to whom the words were said, Sell what thou hast and give to the poor.’ ”

“ No,” said Arthur. “ Those who have great possessions might for the moment go away sorrowful, but I doubt whether they would admit for a second within their hearts the unwelcome self-reproach, namely, that while the crowded poor, stifling in the wretched London alleys,—forced by close contact with each other, by the strength of bad example, and by the air of crime they breathe—are driven into the commission of every vice, *they* are retaining, for their own individual enjoyment and sport, miles upon miles of land, which might, if more rightly shared among our fellow-beings, render so many lives happier, and diminish to a great degree the frightful amount of crime by which the annals of our country are disgraced.”

“ But this is Socialism, or something very like it,” said Burrowes with dismay ; “ you would take from the rich to——”

“ You mistake me,” interrupted Brandreth ; “ I would not take from the rich, but I would tax them heavily—tax them in their self-indulging luxuries, and thus possibly force some to do their duty better to the poor. The land should be taxed more or less as it employs human labour, and then——But I am plunging into politics, of which, after all, I am but little able to speak, being carried away by feelings that have so little in common with the hard details of a nation’s government.”

“ At any rate,” said Helen, changing the subject, “ you have the satisfaction of feeling that you remove your *protégés* from temptation ; for here, certainly, they can do but little harm.”

“ And ‘ the sight of means to do ill-deeds often makes ill-deeds done,’ ” quoted Brandreth, as they rose to depart.

The conversation from that time, and on their way home, turned chiefly on the duties which would devolve upon Burrowes during Arthur’s absence. Among other requests made by the latter, was one that Helen’s cousin should be a constant visitor at Lady Thornleigh’s house. Brandreth had introduced him to his friend ; and the Doctor, in his medical capacity, had at once perceived that there was much to be

done in the improvement of Gertrude's bodily health towards strengthening her nerves and spirits, and rendering her more capable of supporting the approaching trial with courage and dignity.

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### CHAPTER XXXIII.

“Celui-là est le mieux servi qui n'a pas besoin de mettre les mains des autres aux bouts de ses bras.”—ROUSSEAU.

THE travellers had been gone a week, and those they had parted from so reluctantly were beginning to grow accustomed to the dull uniformity that now marked their days, when Gertrude received a letter from Australia, the contents of which were as follows :—

“MADAM,

“It is now a long time since you have heard of the man whom you have such just cause to hate and despise. I am dictating a letter to you from a bed of sickness, nay, in all probability, of death ; but I cannot die with a quiet mind till I have confessed my sins against you, and implored your pardon. Madam, this letter is written by your son. You will be astonished and, perhaps, at first incredulous ; but read my words, and you will be both joyful and convinced. The afflicted being, sorely stricken from his birth by a mysterious Providence, and who I cruelly led you to suppose was the child to whom you had given birth, *is mine*. Believing this, you will be able to comprehend not only the repulsion that you felt for him, but also the tender love which induced me to keep ever near me my helpless son, who was also the child of one who died in his earliest infancy, and whose memory is the dearest thing I have left on earth.

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“Lady Thornleigh! had you ever known the curse of poverty, you would better understand the strength of the temptation that led me to pass off my child, both upon Considine and upon you, as the one that it was incumbent on its parents to care for and enrich. The other—the boy who came into the world perfect in the possession of his senses, with a brain unclouded, and with more than common beauty of person, has, alas! (and now comes the confession of a sin for which, I fear, you will have no forgiveness)—has been left to shift for himself through the trials and temptations of a heartless world! Still, during his helpless childhood, I never lost sight of him, and, seeing with pleasure that his nature was good, I trusted that his conduct hereafter would not belie the promise that he gave.

“Many and severe have been my pangs of conscience for the crime I committed against you, and often has the image of my dear friend appeared before me to reproach me with my treachery. At last, unable to endure the painfulness of my feelings, I took passage for Australia, to which country I had ascertained that your son, Henry Considine, had emigrated. Years elapsed before I found him—years of untold hardships and misery, which, however, I had well deserved. At last I found myself on his track, and, by dint of unceasing perseverance, discovered and made myself known to him. Madam, it is with deep and heartfelt happiness that I give you the assurance that your son is worthy both of you and of the ancient blood of the Considines. The proofs of his identity are indisputable, and are fully confirmed by a mark on his person, which, as an infant, I and those who had the charge of him were cognizant of.

“Your son’s grandfather was fully aware of my reasons for going to Australia—indeed, he kindly supplied me with money for the purpose; and it is with the truest gratification that I have written to inform that venerable gentleman of the complete success that has crowned my labours.

“And now, madam, it only remains for me once more to entreat your pardon, and then—my many sins repented of—I can calmly wait my summons to another and a better world.

“I have the honour to remain, with every wish for your future happiness, your ladyship’s obedient, humble servant,

“(Signed) RICHARD PETERS.”

“P.S.—Immediately on the winding-up of some affairs, which temporarily retain him here, your son will take passage for England. He has magnanimously offered to provide for and bear back to England my afflicted son, whose father’s remains will then be resting in a far-off soil.”

Lady Thornleigh, who was alone when this letter was brought to her, read it over twice before she could fully comprehend its contents, so disturbed was her mind by the intelligence they conveyed. Joy, however, soon began to rise strongly above every other feeling—joy that she had not been the mother of what she deemed “a monster.” She walked about the room exultingly, with the letter in her hand, reading from it from time to time the passages in it that most delighted her. “Perfect in his intellects!—and that idiot creature that I fancied was my son!—how could I be so imposed on?—more than common beauty of person!—and I shall see him and be proud of him! Prouder than I am of Edgar, who——” But here she was interrupted in her self-congratulations by the entrance of Alice, who looked at her beaming countenance wonderingly.

Lady Thornleigh did not keep her in suspense, but put the letter into her sister’s hands, devouring her with her eyes as she read, and striving to trace upon her countenance signs of the rapture she ought to feel.

But no gleams of delight were visible on the face that was bent over the page, only the hand that held it trembled a little, and the cheeks were slightly flushed. She had scarcely finished, when Gertrude’s impatient voice broke in:—

“You don’t seem glad, Alice! You say nothing! Surely it is good news to hear that the dreadful idiot you have seen is nothing to us? You cannot know how shocking has been the thought that I was his mother—the mother of a monster—a Caliban! It made me quite nervous sometimes when I was at night alone, and I have almost dreamt that I was an unnatural thing myself—a sort of *Sycorax*,” she added, laughing, and with a levity that shocked Alice.

She could not congratulate her sister, nor speak the cheerful words that were expected of her. Gladly would she have shared in Gertrude’s joy, even as she had been content, nay happy, to be a partaker of her sorrows; but there was an undefined feeling in her breast, that in Lady Thornleigh’s

exuberant happiness there was something blameable and unnatural, while in the tone of Peters's letter there was nothing (at least she thought so) to inspire either confidence or satisfaction.

Lady Thornleigh was of a different opinion, and wrote by the earliest mail both to Sir Edgar and to Brandreth, informing them of the important announcement that had been made to her. Her spirits, also, rose to fever-heat ; and she was for ever congratulating herself on the possession of a son of whom she at once decided she should be proud, and on her release from the imaginary tie which had bound her to a being that was hateful to her.

It was, as we have said, impossible for Alice to sympathize with the raptures in which for a few weeks Lady Thornleigh indulged. They subsided, however, after a while, dulled by the monotonous tenor of their lives ; and Alice felt relieved when her sister's spirits fell again to their former level.

Meanwhile the weary hours stole on, and the autumn months and the dreary winter passed away, and no event worthy of record had occurred in Lady Thornleigh's family. The trial was to take place at the Spring Assizes, and in the county town which we will call Bilsden, and which was about seven miles from Thornleigh Abbey. It had been a great aggravation of Gertrude's distress when she heard where, and in what county, that dreaded event was to take place ; for already in her mind's eye she saw the crowded court filled to suffocation with curious faces—faces that she had known as familiar ones long years before, in the days when she was a respected “lady” and a cared-for wife !

Gatherock had not often deemed it necessary to hold personal communication with his client ; the truth being that they had now little to do but to wait, with what patience they could muster, for Brandreth's communications, and, above all, for his return.

The messenger who had been despatched to Cuba had returned with no satisfactory intelligence. The English Consul well remembered the arrival and also the departure of Considine, who, during his residence on the island, had been received into the house of a kinswoman of his mother's. That Gertrude's husband had *not* died there was proved beyond a doubt ; and on questioning the Creole relations of whom he had been the guest, it was no less evident, from a comparison

of dates, that he must have been alive within six weeks of Lady Thornleigh's second marriage.

This information was at once communicated by Gatherock to his client, whose small stock of spirits fell immediately to zero ; and it required all the united efforts of Alice and the Doctor to bring back the slightest sensation of hope to her desponding heart.

Alice had received a few letters from Brandreth. They had come at rare intervals, and had told them little—nevertheless, they had been warmly welcomed ; but later, when months passed away, and no intelligence reached them from the absent ones, even Alice's patient and courageous heart began to fail her. Marie was still absent. She had entreated to be allowed to return home, but in a family council before Brandreth's and Edgar's departure, it had been agreed amongst them that the girl was better at a distance. “Time enough for Marie to come home when we are all happy again at the old Abbey.”

These were among Arthur's parting words to Gertrude : he had meant to cheer her, but his remark had the contrary effect on one whose habitual depression was almost a malady ; and Lady Thornleigh had only responded to his hopeful words by silent tears.

The New Year was ushered in by a frost, the hardest that had been known in England for years. During its continuance Gertrude and her sister remained much at home ; and being almost always alone, their conversation invariably turned upon the travellers, the probability of their early return, and the chances for and against their having been rewarded for their long and unwearied exertions.

“If we could but hear of them !” was Lady Thornleigh's constant cry ; and even Alice seemed to have lost the desire to convince her that all was right and “for the best.”

Johnnie Paulett was a constant visitor at Lady Thornleigh's house, and, though the sisters knew it not, a frequent medium through which Helen Vaughan gained intelligence of Philip's widow and his family. She, the woman who had never for a moment lost sight of the great duty that had devolved upon her, was often near them when they suspected it not, following them at a distance in their early walks, and sorrowfully noting the signs of “limited means” evident in the dress of both. It was impossible effectually to remedy the evil—impossible to

substitute dresses more befitting their station for the shabby ones that were worn by Lady Thornleigh and her sister. But there were some trifling pleasures, that wealth can bestow, which found their way to the little lodging ; and when Paulett, who was in Helen's confidence, brought as offerings of his own to Alice, bouquets of delicious flowers and baskets of hot-house fruits, the “pious frauds” were never suspected ; and the giver had the satisfaction, small though it was, of feeling that the recipients were enjoying a portion of that which she deemed was of right their own.

A more intimate acquaintance with Lady Thornleigh did not tend to raise Johnnie's opinion either of her mind or heart, nor were his prejudices altogether unfounded ; for it is scarcely possible for any nature to remain undeteriorated when, from early childhood, there has existed the terrible necessity for concealment, and when no gentle mother's love has opened the heart and softened the character.

It is a grievous thought that even those who love us are apt to overlook, in their contemplation of our faults, the excuses that might be urged in our favour. There is seldom a counsel retained for the defence in the courts of our own hearts, where judgment on our fellow-creatures is to be pronounced ; and even the lenient and long-trusting Alice was led at last to think more of her sister's errors than of her temptations, more of her deceptions than of her trials. She struggled vigorously against the feeling that was gradually, as she too justly feared, drawing her farther and farther from one whom she had so long upheld and trusted in. She felt that “to be wroth with those we love works,” if not exactly “madness in the brain,” at least very painful sensations in the heart. Then, too, she suspected herself of selfishness, and of the wickedness of thinking less kindly of her sister because that sister had been the involuntary cause of her lover's banishment. In short, poor Alice felt anything but in her normal state of placid contentment ; and it was only in the constant attention to her duties, as a visitor of the poor and sick, that she could divert her mind from her home sorrows and perplexities.

It was one bitter frosty afternoon that, on her return from a charitable mission, she found Dr. Burrowes in the house. She looked pale and exhausted ; and the Doctor, as he drew an armchair for her near the fire, noticed that she did so.

“A little tired,” she said, in answer to his kind questioning, “and a little disappointed. There is scarcely anything that can be done. We can give hardly any real assistance; and we all feel, sorrowfully, that these attempts of ours are but as a drop in the ocean, utterly useless for any effectual good.”

“Just as we often see palliatives tried in our profession,” said the Doctor, “when there exists a means of radical cure, which, because it is an expensive one, is never tried; and so the patient lingers on, even as do your poor, in suffering and distress.”

“How I long for the money, to be spent upon their permanent benefit, which has been wasted in empty useless pomp, and in marble monuments to the dead!” cried Alice. “Heartless waste such memorials seem to me while hundreds are sick and starving! If the many ladies who visit among the poor had only the means to do the good that their hearts prompt them to effect, what a blessing it would be!”

“I believe it; and as to costly memorials, excepting in the form of permanent charities, I agree with you in the folly and wickedness of wasting money upon them as long as the cry of the poor is ascending up to Heaven. But now tell me (to change a subject which always makes me feel indignant)—tell me if you have heard lately from the absent ones? I was about to put the question to Lady Thornleigh when you returned.”

“Alas, no!” replied Alice; “not a word for ten weeks. We cannot guess the reason of their silence, but it is most harassing. I cannot help fearing for them, and then the time is drawing near!”

“Yes! the dreadful, fearful time!” broke in Lady Thornleigh. “In three weeks I shall be a prisoner—a prisoner at the bar!” and she burst into tears.

“My dear madam,” said Burrowes, taking her hand kindly, “you must not allow yourself to look only on the mournful side of the question. Think of your son’s return—your sons’, may I not say?” (for there were no family secrets hidden from the Doctor.) “Think of their return, and look forward with hope.”

But the weeks passed away, and still no letters reached them; nor was there any intelligence received of those who, on the expected trial, could be the sole witnesses in favour of the accused.

And now it is the eve of the momentous day; and by the

first morning-light Alice seeks her sister's chamber, and with all the tenderness of her earliest years, presses her lips upon her cheek. They are in the county town where the assizes are being held—the county town so near to Thornleigh ; and Gertrude, as her sister's kiss awakes her from her feverish slumber, looks round with a bewildered air at the sorry apartment where she has passed the night.

“Alice !” she cried, “I feel like a criminal about to be led to execution. What have I done that I should be so tortured and tormented ?”

Lady Thornleigh spoke in her usual exaggerated tone, a fashion that had sometimes rather provoked Alice ; but on this occasion she could only feel pity and commiseration.

“We are in the hands of God, dear Gertrude, who will be more merciful than man, and who alone can tell how far we have deserved our punishments.”

“But have you any hope,—any idea that I shall be saved ?” asked Gertrude, piteously.

Alice could not bear to give utterance to her fears, so merely said, as she waived the question :

“The day is not yet over, Gertrude ; and while there is light we will, by the blessing of God, cling closely to the hopes that have buoyed us up so long !”

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## CHAPTER XXXIV

“An empty and a cruel sacrifice,  
Ye now prepare. . . .  
Out of the fears and hate which vain desires have brought.”  
SHELLEY.

DURING the journey and voyage to the Great Colony (a pilgrimage which was performed in the most expeditious manner possible) the acquaintance between Arthur and his young companion ripened into friendship. There are few better tests of the value of a character than are to be found in the course of a long *tête-à-tête* journey through a country where there are inconveniences to bear with, and during a lengthened voyage, when the powers of conversation, and also those of patience and endurance, may be severely tried.

From these ordeals Edgar Thornleigh came out triumphant, and it was no small satisfaction to Arthur to be convinced that the son of his old friend was one capable not only of adorning the important social position in which he might eventually be placed, but of bearing with manly courage the shock of disappointment, and the comparative poverty to which he might in all likelihood be reduced.

The fact was that the moral and intellectual education of the boy had been better suited than Brandreth had imagined to form the man. In the first place he had lived with and been (what is denominated) “brought up by” a selfish and exacting person. There are cases and characters in which such an element in the rearing of children may be disadvantageous to them, but in Edgar Thornleigh it worked only good. Accustomed from his infancy to hear disparaging remarks on his absent parents, and even forced, as he grew in years, to listen to hints which filled his young heart with shame

and anger, he had been early led to control the fierce impulse which urged him to defend the absent ; for the slanderer was a woman, and that woman the relation whose bread he ate and under whose roof he was sheltered. Pride—the pride which belongs to and is fostered by the certain succession to wealth and station—was unknown to young Thornleigh ; nor was he the less exempt from another evil attendant on the anticipated enjoyment of ready-made honours. He was not ignorant. Education had been with him not a form, but a reality ; for, stimulated by a desire to obtain distinction for himself, he had worked hard at the public school where so many learn so little ; and his name for talents and energy was already known in the limited circle of his own small world. The evils that might have accrued from this gratification to his vanity were neutralized by the subduing influence of his home-life : Mrs. Ellerton was far from wanting in affection for and pride in her grandson, but, happily for him, she loved herself better, and (as we have said) the consequences of her egotism worked great good to the child of her adoption.

There was one other whose near neighbourhood was not without some effect in forming the mind and character of Edgar Thornleigh. Francis Herbert was little changed since the day we saw him last, and when in his mistaken Christian anger he bade farewell to Alice Ellerton. He was still unmarried, and still (at least to those about him he appeared so) as severe in his judgments, and as rigid as ever in the ascetic principles he professed and advocated. But to Herbert himself it was known that a change in his inner man had been long gradually working. He had begun to feel (and that not since yesterday, but from the hour when the love of a young girl was lost to him) that it is not in the “cold abstinence from evil deeds,” or even in the dry performance of “inevitable charities,” that there is enough to satisfy the cravings of his heart. Then he longed for tender friendship, and for a human affection to which to cling. Alice, he told himself, he would forget ; and he more than once bethought him that, perchance, he might elsewhere meet others as fair as she, and who would be more willing to share his trials, and help him to do his work. But though such an idea had sometimes flitted across the brain of the Rector, it never worked him up to action ; and some years later, when Philip’s death made his life a still more solitary one, he seemed to have given up all idea of filling up

the void which the loss of Alice's affection had left in his heart, and the little world of Thornfield said that Francis Herbert was a bachelor for life.

One of his chief interests lay in the superintendence he exercised over the mental education of the little Edgar. It might be that, seeing the boy banished from his father's house, his conscience smote him for his inward condemnation of the mother; or possibly the thought of Alice's devotion to the children might have stimulated him in his efforts to serve the one who remained in his neighbourhood. Be this as it may, Herbert took a deep interest in the boy, encouraging his visits to the Rectory, and losing no opportunity of inculcating in him lessons of religious duty and of useful self-government. With Edgar he ceased to be stern: and when the child, with his heart full of some real or fancied grief, would fly to his friend for comfort and assistance, the Rector was always ready with his sympathy and with his aid. But it was in after-years, and when the boy's mind began to open to the fatal knowledge of his mother's errors, that the friendship of that seemingly inaccessible man was proved most valuable. Then did he pour salve into the wounds of injured pride and hurt affection, and, binding them up with words of hope, he sent him forth again braced for the battle of life, and ready for endurance.

This slight sketch of Edgar Thornleigh's previous history was perhaps necessary before we bring him into action, on a scene where the best powers both of his mind and body will be required of him. And let it be remembered that in years he was still hardly more than a boy, though the peculiar circumstances in which he had been placed had developed in him an intelligence and an insight into human nature beyond his years.

On their arrival at Sydney, the travellers found it easy enough to trace the man they sought. Peters had never assumed an *alias*, nor had he ever given himself the trouble to throw a veil of mystery over his proceedings. Everywhere, therefore, he with his two companions were to be heard of; but to their great regret, Arthur and Edgar also learnt that many months had elapsed since the individuals they were in search of had been seen either in the city or its neighbourhood. Among the places to which they resorted for information was the hospital where, during his sad illness, Edgar's half-brother had been so long sheltered. There they

were informed of that portion of his history, and also of his removal thence by Peters.

Before their departure from Sydney to prosecute their search, Brandreth and his friend visited the convent of mercy, in order to express their gratitude to the kindly Nun who had attended the sufferer through his illness. She was not a silent daughter of Eve, that active Sister, but was, on the contrary, one who, like Martha of old, “was careful and troubled about many things ;” and consequently, when Brandreth and his friend visited (as was the wont of strangers) the now nearly finished convent, she told them the story of Henry Considine among other curious annals of accident and crime.

“I do not know,” she said (not noticing the expressive glances which had passed between the two men during the continuance of her narrative)—“I do not know whether before that fearful blow the young man’s intellects were more or less clouded than they were after it had taken place. The skull was broken in, and the brain protruded from the opening. It was a terrible sight, and we all thought that he would die ; but at last he rallied, nor do I think that the poor creature ever suffered during the operation that was performed. He was trepanned, and there was then no pressure on the brain—at least so the doctors said. We were very grieved for him, and said many prayers for the suffering young man while he was with us, and after too ;” and sister Catherine raised her eyes, and crossed herself devoutly. Edgar would have spoken, but his words were arrested by Brandreth.

“So he has left Sydney ? And can you tell us where he is gone ? I have heard of your unfortunate patient, and we are most desirous of knowing the place of his present abode.”

“And that is what I cannot tell you,” said the Sister. “He had improved greatly in health, and had begun to show symptoms of intelligence which we had scarcely expected from him ; when one day, to our great regret, a gentleman called at the hospital, and claimed him as a relation. They could not detain the poor fellow from his friends ; but, somehow, the gentlemen did not feel quite satisfied when they saw him taken away, and since that day nothing has been heard of him.”

And this was all, or nearly all, that the anxious searchers could learn, in that town, of the whereabouts of those they sought. Still they were not discouraged ; and at last, by dint of unceasing efforts, they succeeded in finding the tracks of the

wanderers. There is a desert district far away from Sydney, and some twenty-five miles distant from a considerable river ; and in that district they learned that they would surely find the men of whom they were in pursuit. As they approached nearer to the spot which had been indicated to them, assurance became doubly sure ; and hope turning into certainty, they held a consultation as to how they should commence their dealings with the man whom they had so much cause to suspect of unscrupulous dishonesty. Edgar was for taking with him an addition to their force, or for going to the encounter armed with the authority of the law. To both these plans Brandreth saw objections. They were two, he said—sufficient, surely, for any exigencies that were likely to arise ; and as for law, what proof had they that Peters had in any way rendered himself amenable to it ? No, they would trust to themselves and their own courage and ingenuity to gain their ends ; and to this resolve Edgar, who generally yielded to his friend, at length assented.

And now, for a short time, we must leave the men of honest purpose, and introduce our readers to the interior of a hut far up in the Australian country, where guilty plotters are preparing for the last act of a tragic drama.

The hut consists of but one room, but is of tolerably large dimensions, and contains three of what are called in the country bed-places. The walls are formed of saplings, about six inches in diameter, and these are put together vertically. They are about eight feet in height, and are placed as closely as the knots in the wood will allow of. This, as may be supposed, is not a very effectual method for the keeping out of such intruders as bad weather, eyes of watchers, or ears of listeners ; but of this especial inconvenience more will be said hereafter. A huge fireplace occupies almost the whole of one side of the hut. The fire in it has burnt low, and over the embers two men are conversing. It is a bare-looking and wretched place enough, for the roof is of bark, through which the water filters, and, dropping steadily down, forms a pond in the centre of the earthen floor. In one corner is a large cask, in which is kept the provision of salt beef, and in the centre is a rough wooden table, on which stand tin drinking-vessels—the contents of those pannikins being probably something stronger than the pure element that is descending so steadily outside the hut.

So much for the interior of the dwelling. We must now proceed to describe its occupants. One of these was a man whose age might be some few years past fifty, but who appeared still in the full vigour of his robust and powerful manhood. He had a shrewd but somewhat apprehensive face, marked eyebrows, and a thick beard, which effectually concealed the expression of his mouth from observation.

The other man was much younger, and was as dark as a Spaniard, with cruel eyes and a sensual mouth. Both were dressed with an utter disregard to the fashions and habits of civilized life. Their trousers were of moleskin, and their coloured shirts of serge; on the head of the elder man was that peculiar colonial *coiffure* called a cabbage-tree hat, while the long, straight, black hair of the younger was without a covering.

“Hal,” said Peters (for it was he), addressing his companion, who was gazing moodily at the expiring ashes, “I didn’t mean to say I wouldn’t do it.”

“No, by ——! but you mean me to do it alone. Do you think now I don’t know you? Do you think I don’t see what a d—d white-livered son of a——”

“Come, no names,” said Peters, angrily. “I won’t stand that; and I won’t stand you, that’s more, unless you keep a civil tongue in your head.”

The individual apostrophized as “Hal” saw the mistake into which an ungoverned temper had led him, and apologized for his rudeness without delay.

“Come,” said he, “don’t let us two quarrel. You can do nothing without me, nor I without you, so we’d best be friends.”

Peters accepted the excuse, and went on with his remarks in as agreeable a manner as he could assume.

“You see,” he said, unwilling to exhibit any more signs of weakness to the critical eye of his friend—“you see I have done my best to get rid of him, and he *won’t* die.”

They were—at least they thought so—in an almost desert solitude, with nothing living nearer than the numerous flocks within the not far-distant sheep-yard, and not a human ear for many a mile away. With this conviction they spoke aloud and unreservedly, while—But time will show by whom those last and startling words had been overheard, and who those were that, stationed behind the ill-placed saplings, could,

through the open interstices, both see and hear what passed within the hut.

“Won’t he?” said Hal, impressively, as he glanced ominously towards the bed.

“No; and now I think it’s your turn. By Jove! I’ve tried to make the poor devil kill himself. I’ve left him alone to starve, or fall into the fire, and I’ve flogged him more than once hard enough. I could have done it better years ago, when he was quite stupid; but now, by ——! Do you know, sometimes I think he’s fond of me?”

“D——d stuff!” said the bolder villain, and again he glanced towards the bed.

“You do it,” said Peters, in a lower voice, “and by —— I won’t peach!”

Hal laid down the tin pannikin he had been holding, and looked hard at his companion.

“What I do you’ll have a hand in, or by —— nothing’s done! And now drink a drop more, and try to get some courage into your cowardly carease.”

There was silence while they drank, and the two men outside crouched down, with white faces and loudly-beating hearts. One—the youngest—made a movement towards the door of the hut, but the other held him back, laying a finger on his own lips as he did so. Again they listened, and, gazing intensely through the chinks, watched the two men within.

“You think, I suppose,” said Hal, marking the glow that was beginning to spread over his companion’s face—“you think I am going to spend my life in this cursed hole? Much obliged to you, but I’ve had enough of it; and what’s more, there isn’t a day but what gives us a chance the less. It isn’t so easy to keep the b——d young hound tied up all day; and he not be heard to howl, and be d——d to him!”

It was frightful to listen to the man’s oaths, but more terrible still to watch his darkening face as the curses poured from his black heart like water. Meanwhile both men continued to drink slowly, but perseveringly; while on the bed, and beneath its dirty blankets, lay one who, though he could not hear, stared at them with wide-open eyes.

“It’s growing dark,” observed Peters, after they had sat for some time in silence.

“Of course it is,” said the other; “you didn’t expect the daylight was to stay to give you courage, did you? Now don’t

you be a fool. The fellow's not half a man ; he hasn't his senses, and it would have been a mercy if he'd been taken long ago. We expect Anderson about those sheep to-morrow, and if he's found here then, by —— we're floored ! Now or never —now I say, or we may rot in this b——d place till the Day of Judgment.”

Peters, apparently convinced by his arguments, seemed at last prepared to follow his advice, and rising from his seat with a stupid dogged look, moved from the table, followed by Hal, who fixed a cold glittering eye upon his half-intoxicated accomplice. At that moment the two men outside likewise roused themselves from their crouching posture, and made towards the door, which was at right angles to the fireplace, and close to the bed on which the intended victim lay.

The door was only fastened by a latch ; and as they raised the latter, a slight struggling noise was heard inside.

Over the low bed (to the side of which he had been thrust by his accomplice) Peters leant, with his bulky head and shoulders almost resting upon the chest of him whose life they aimed at. The other man was more actively employed ; for while with one hand he pressed heavily on the recumbent form, the fingers of the other were compressed in an iron grasp on the throat, from whence issued gurgling sounds, as of one in his death-agony.

It was very nearly dark when Brandreth and Edgar, with a loud cry (a cry of horror lest they should at last have come too late), burst upon the assailants. Hal, startled at the sound they made, at once turned round and faced them, while his accomplice moved as quickly from the bed as his half-drunken state permitted. The new-comers were armed with pistols, but the fiery passions of both, and the astonishment of the assassins, rendered a recourse to their use unnecessary. With one blow of his muscular arm Brandreth hurled the wretched Peters backwards : he fell near the heavy table, and, striking his head against it, lay there motionless. The younger man proved less easy to deal with ; and it is possible that their united strength might have been inadequate to master him, had not the sight of their revolvers proved effectual in bringing him to reason. Once convinced that resistance was useless, the ruffian submitted to a fate that seemed inevitable, and in sulky silence permitted himself to be made prisoner.

They were at no loss for bonds wherewith to bind him, strong

and effective ones being found in the stirrup-leathers of their saddles; while with a piece of new rope, which they fortunately found, they fastened the culprit to the wall by means of the openings between the saplings, round one of which they twisted and made fast the cord.

This done, and their vigorous foe secured, the men, heated and panting, paused to recover their breath. The place was silent enough now; for in one corner lay the body of a man, who (both to their surprise and consternation) gave no signs of life, while from the bed there came no sound. They looked at one another in silent consternation, nor was there need to speak the thoughts that came thronging into the minds of each. What was it—so they in silence asked themselves—what was it that they had come into the wilderness to see and to do? They had hoped to obtain information and aid from a man whose tongue, they feared, they had rendered for ever mute; and now it was probable that they must return as they came, and without the evidence they had travelled so far to seek. But regrets were useless now; and after their short investigation of that apparently lifeless form, they turned to other duties. Edgar hid his face in his hands when Arthur, turning down the blankets, laid his hand on the poor idiot's heart and listened for its beatings.

“Thank God!” he said, “thank God, Edgar, there is life in him yet.”

“Then what the devil are you here for, making this confounded row?” growled the prisoner as, crouching like a chained tiger, his eyes glared upon his keepers. “Is a man to be knocked down and get his head broken because he happens to be feeling his relation's pulse? I tell you what, my fine fellows, you'll catch it for this, as sure as my name's Considine; and as for the poor young man on the bed, why, he's been down with fever for weeks, and it's my belief you've killed him with the fright, and be d—d to you.”

During these remarks, called forth by Hal's consoling reflection that, as young Considine was still in the land of the living, it was at least not a hanging matter, Brandreth and Edgar (the latter having struck a match and lighted a candle) were so busied in endeavours to revive the unfortunate being whose life had been thus providentially saved, that the name of “Considine,” let fall by Hal, had entirely escaped their notice.

By the dim light of the candle they scanned the features of him they had rescued from death ; and it was with a sensation of relief that Edgar perceived none of that revolting appearance which he had been led to expect he would see there. The terrible grasp upon his throat had, fortunately, not lasted long enough to cause suffocation ; and Gertrude's son now lay, pale and exhausted, and evidently in some bodily pain from the effects of that inhuman treatment, but with a pulse which, though feeble, had a continuous beating, and an expression in his eyes that did not tell of approaching dissolution. His deliverers spoke to him, but received no answer ; only he stroked Brandreth's hand caressingly, and when offered water, which stood in a cup by the bedside, he made a gesture of dissent, which proved that he understood their meaning.

After a few minutes of whispered consultation (for they had allowed Hal's observations to pass unnoticed), it was decided that Thornleigh should ride one of the horses that had brought them to the hut, to a dwelling of a similar description that had been their halting-place on the previous night. It was about ten miles distant, and was occupied by a young English settler and two Chinamen. There could be no doubt, they thought, that when the emergency of the case was made known to the former, he would gladly afford them every assistance in his power.

Brandreth, as the sounds of the horse's hoofs died away in the distance, felt to its full extent the responsibility he had incurred. He had the prospect of ample time to dwell upon what that responsibility demanded of him, nor were his thoughts likely (as far at least as appearances went) to be disturbed by human voices ; but the silence that reigned was darkened by the shadow of crime, and rendered loathsome by the presence of the criminals. He sat for some time in deep reflection, his wooden stool being placed close to the occupied bed, while his elbow rested on the rough wood that formed its frame. A piece of bark placed against the wall protected his head from the air that whistled through the crevices, and against that rude shelter the tired man rested.

His situation was by no means a pleasant one, with a bound criminal in front of him, and within a few yards the body of a man who for years had been meditating as foul a deed as ever figured in the annals of crime. There was a dim and flickering light within the hut, which wavered in the wind that

blew between the saplings, and all seemed to promise that the time of waiting would be a weary and an anxious one. Brandreth was fatigued and feverish, and raising to his lips the cup of water of which the poor victim had declined to drink, he swallowed a few mouthfuls hastily. The liquid had a bitter brackish taste, but this at the moment was not noticed by the thirsty man, who after setting down the vessel proceeded to calculate the time that must elapse before Edgar's return. Three hours he feared he would have to pass in that detested company; so making up his mind to endurance, he with watch in hand began to count the moments as they passed slowly by.

After a while, and at first to his surprise, a feeling of drowsiness crept over him. For a time he struggled against this new enemy, attacking it by rapid movement, and even going forth into the cold night-air in hopes to chase away the foe. But all was in vain; and at length, yielding to the oppressive sensation of stupor which was gradually stealing over his senses, he ceased the contest, and, returning to his stool, rested his heavy head against the wall and slept.

How long that strange slumber had lasted he knew not, when a finger touching his shoulder roused him; and looking whence that touch had come, he saw a thin hand extended from the bed-covering, and pointing steadily in one direction.

“What is the matter?” asked Brandreth, too bewildered to remember, on his first awakening, the infirmity of his companion. “What is the matter?—what are you pointing at?”

The question was apparently a useless one; for, instead of a reply in words, the hand continued to point, and ever, as at first, in one direction, namely, to the spot where the motionless body lay. Almost mechanically, Arthur looked at his watch, and thought, in his sleepy dulness, that there wanted yet an hour to the time when Edgar might be expected to return.

Meanwhile there was a living man within that hut on whose presence, both in the flesh and the spirit, Brandreth had not reckoned. Peters had been severely stunned, but scarcely, if at all, injured by the blow that had been dealt him. From the first (for the shock had sobered him) he had resolved to feign death, and under its semblance to wait for the

return-stroke by which he hoped to win back the chances he had lost.

At a glance, and by the mere sound of their voices, he had divined the manner of men by whom they had been surprised ; and fully convinced that their opponents were of the number of those by whom the shedding of blood (even in self-defence) is deemed an odious act, there dawned upon him a glimmering of hope that the stakes for which he had played were not wholly lost, and that the game might be commenced anew with some chance of success.

Slowly he raised himself on his elbow, and looking about him perceived that the near neighbourhood of Brandreth to the revolver, and its comparatively great distance from himself, rendered many precautions necessary.

Hal, by whom the *ruse* had been suspected from the first, became in an instant a silent but intensely interested spectator ; while, to the great satisfaction of Peters, Brandreth, whose momentary return to consciousness had threatened to defeat his plans, seemed again to have sunk into a lethargic slumber. Then he slowly raised himself on his knees, and inch by inch, and with a noiselessness that resembled the stealthy advance of a serpent, he dragged himself along the floor. But an eye saw him as he crept onwards, and one whom he had believed stupefied out of all power to commit a deed so daring, gave a warning of his approach.

With a frightened gaze (fixed as though fascinated by a basilisk) Henry Considine watched the crawling figure as it came nearer to his preserver ; but it was not till Peters (who had gradually risen to his feet) had approached within dangerous distance of Arthur's pistol, that he again, but with a stronger pressure, touched the sleeper's arm. Brandreth awoke with a start ; but bewildered as he was, he still had the power to collect his thoughts and see his danger. In a moment he sprung to his feet, and prepared to close with his antagonist. The action was simultaneous with a movement on the part of Peters, who darted forward with a yell of fury and disappointment ; and then the two men (for Arthur's revolver had been laid beyond reach of his hand) closed with one another in a deadly struggle.

It would be as impossible to describe the mad rage of the prisoner at Peters's abortive attempt, as it would be to repeat the language in which he mingled his frantic encouragement

to his confederate with the panting breath of the now desperate combatants. It was a wrestle for life or death, one, however, in which the advantages were wholly on the side of the older man ; for Brandreth, besides that he was of a far less ponderous frame, had against him the fearful odds of a brain racked with wild confusion, and limbs momentarily paralyzed by mysterious illness.

“At his throat !” screamed Hal, whose voice had grown hoarse and harsh with the violence of his execrations. “At his throat, b—t him—use the knife, and cut his cursed life out of him, you blundering b—d— !”

But suddenly the voice ceased ; there was a heavy fall—a howl as of one in torture—and all was still !

A few moments elapsed before Brandreth recovered the consciousness of his situation ; and when he did so, it was to find that his brain was still partially confused, and that the weight of his adversary’s body crushed him down and kept him where he lay.

Meanwhile Hal was writhing in his bonds, and twisting his thin muscular hands within the leathern straps, till the fingers grew black with the blood that had been pressed into them. A less desperate man would have given up the effort at self-liberation, from the mere pain that effort caused him ; but, maddened by approaching danger, he laboured on, and every moment added to his chances of success.

While thus employed (and though it takes long in telling, the attempt had scarcely occupied many minutes of time) the candle had burnt down nearly to its socket, sending out, however, at intervals, sudden jets of flame, that for a passing moment lighted up the scene. During one of those fitful gleams, the rays fell vividly upon the person of the prisoner ; and then, to his dismay, Arthur perceived the work on which the desperate ruffian was engaged. The broad strong leather would have defied every effort to break and all attempts to gnaw it with the teeth asunder ; but, alas ! the men who had fastened the thongs were not versed in prison-craft, and, moreover, they had shrunk from fastening the straps so tightly that the blood could not circulate through his wrists. It followed, therefore, that by dint of great perseverance and long-continued struggling, Hal had succeeded in nearly extricating his right hand from imprisonment ; and that was the sight witnessed by Arthur when the light streamed upon the

prisoner's form. A few moments more, and he doubted not that one of the hands of the revengeful savage would be at liberty ; the freeing of his limbs would afterwards be but the affair of a moment, and then—— But no—it was not for a strong man to lie there passively, looking on and doing nothing, but hoping only for the aid from without, that might not come in time to succour him. Stunned and giddy as he was, he strove to rise ; but as he did so, the river of warm blood that had welled over him sent up a sickening odour, and for a moment he sunk back, while a deadly faintness crept over him.

There had been increasing darkness within the hut, as the solitary candle gave out its expiring flame ; but at length, the last of those “ lightings up ” which preceded extinction flared high, and for a few moments continuously.

Then Brandreth saw the extremity of his danger—saw that the perseverance of his enemy had at last triumphed ; and that with one liberated hand he was rapidly unfastening the bonds that confined him.

With the strength that necessity for self-preservation alone can give, Arthur, by an almost convulsive effort, shook off the weight that pressed him down, and staggered to his feet. But, rapid as had been the movement, Hal had been too quick for him ; for the work of the desperate villain had been accomplished, and he was free ! The rush of both men to seize the deadly weapon that still lay upon the table was simultaneous ; but even as their hands were about to close upon it, the last flicker of light died out, and they were left in total darkness !

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

“ And where is truth ? On tombs ! for such to thee  
Has been my heart—and thy dead memory  
Has lain from *girlhood*, many a changeful year  
Unchangingly preserved, and buried there.”

FRAGMENT.

THE old assize-town of Bilsden differs little from many another commonplace assemblage of straight streets and unpicturesque houses that are to be met with in our island. There is no cathedral to roam about, and no barracks for officers to lounge in ; but there is a High Street, in which stand the old-fashioned rival houses called the “ Red Lion ” and the “ Castle ; ” and there is the Court-house, which is an imposing building standing on one side of the market-place.

It is the Spring Assizes, and the Judge has just made his entry.

The two great yearly events at Bilsden are the arrivals of that well-known personage and his solemn *cortége*. The awful presence in the town of those black gentlemen is a delight to the Bilsden citizens, who (for he has been several years on the circuit) know every frown and wrinkle of the Judge’s face, and, for that matter, are cognizant of not a few of the barristers’ peculiarities likewise.

Let us go inside the Court-house : it will be a hard matter, for every seat is occupied ; there is a “ forest of faces in every row,” and all the doors and avenues are well-nigh blocked up with eager claimants for admission. The Attorney-General has been engaged, and the junior counsel is opening the case for the prosecution. He is speaking slowly and distinctly, and is eagerly listened to as he plainly lays the case before the Court.

The accused has been what in newspaper language is called “accommodated with a chair.” She is dressed in deep mourning, and a thick veil is over her face. Near her is a lady, also veiled ; and on those two figures a great portion of public attention is fixed. The barrister proceeds in his eloquent harangue, and as he does so, a very young man, fair and handsome, leans forward, and listens with a flushed and eager countenance. It is curious how that clear-speaking lawyer dwells upon the fact of the first marriage—dwells upon it till there is not one within that crowded assemblage who can retain a doubt that the accused had in her early girlhood been married by a binding ceremony : then it was that the young man's cheek flushed, and that a look of triumph glistened in his eyes.

The witnesses for the prosecution were very numerous : they had been brought (some of them at least) from distant places on the Continent ; and all they swore to, tended to establish the fact that Henry Considine had been seen alive within a few weeks only of the date of the second marriage. Up to this point all seemed going terribly against the prisoner ; for the evidence given was, as we have before said, very conclusive : nor did it appear that any of those brought forward could be actuated by any private motive in giving their testimony when called upon. Many remembered that they had seen Henry Considine at such-and-such a period, and that was all, they having had little or no personal acquaintance with him.

The letters of the man Peters to Mrs. Wraxham were next produced, and in them the writer clearly stated that the deceased Henry Considine was not dead at the time of his wife's marriage with Sir Philip Thornleigh. At a time named in one of the letters, Peters declared upon his oath that he and Considine were in Paris together, and that on a particular day, a month after Sir Philip's marriage with Mrs. Considine, the husband of that lady had left the house, and not returning, Peters had become alarmed, and had gone in search of him. The course of his inquiries brought him to the *Morgue*, and there he recognized and identified the body of his friend. In one letter Peters expressed deep regret at having, quite unintentionally, misled Lady Thornleigh into a premature belief of her husband's death.

The handwriting of Peters was proved in Court ; and as he was known by many of the witnesses to have been an intimate

acquaintance of the late Henry Considine, and as nothing had been said to throw discredit on his character, his evidence was received, and clearly told with terrible weight against the prisoner.

It was late when the examination of the last witness for the prosecution was concluded, and the Judge therefore directed that the defence should be postponed till the following day. The accused was led out of Court by the young man whose interest in the case had been so strongly marked ; and it was noticed that her step was firm, and her head erect, as she passed through the assembled multitude.

On the evening of that day, the trial of Sir Philip Thornleigh's widow was, in every house and in all quarters, the one universal topic of conversation. In the public-houses and low beer-shops rude men discussed the question coarsely and freely ; while in the town, and even far into the surrounding country, the talk in drawing-rooms was of her who had been once one of them, but who now was, as they all felt convinced, destined to undergo the punishment due to her dark offence.

When morning came, the first thought of every one was to hurry to the Court-house ; for to obtain what was considered a “good place,” no number of hours was thought too long to wait.

Lady Thornleigh's case came on at once, and it was then Gatherock's turn to show what the eloquence of man's tongue can do. His speech for the defence lasted some hours, and was not only a brilliant forensic display, but was calculated, by the acuteness of the speaker's observations, and the impressive description he drew of the trials of his unhappy client, to enlist the deepest sympathy in her behalf. When he concluded, many of the ladies (and among them were not a few of those who had before pronounced her guilty) were in tears ; and the hearts even of the men who condemned the accused were moved to pity.

Next came the examination of the witnesses for the defence, and the first name called was that of Arthur Brandreth. There was hardly one in that thickly-crowded Court who did not, either personally or by reputation, know that good and noble-hearted man : and therefore, when (to the surprise of many who had shared in the anxiety respecting him) he stood up to give his testimony, all eyes were turned upon him, and perfect silence reigned throughout the Court.

Arthur was attired in deep mourning ; but on his face there were no traces either of fatigue or sorrow, and he looked round with what was almost a smile upon his lip.

The usual oath was administered to him, and then—— But no : there is no need to repeat his words, or to dwell upon the particulars of the short but overpowering evidence which, delivered in the impressive tones of his convincing voice, he produced in Lady Thornleigh's favour.

Among the papers found on the person of the dead Peters (for it is needless to say that Edgar arrived at the Australian hut in time to save his friend) was one containing three ill-written lines from Lady Thornleigh's first husband, in which the latter stated that he was dying of sudden illness in a small and obscure village in the heart of the Pyrenees. Thither (for they returned by the Overland Route) Brandreth and his companion hastened, and found no difficulty in procuring an attested copy of the *Acte de Décès* of Henry Considine. He had died ten days before Lady Thornleigh's second marriage ; and as there was, besides this all-important document, other and satisfactory corroborating testimony, there was but one feeling throughout the Court as Arthur left the witness-box ; and that feeling was, that Lady Thornleigh's acquittal was certain.

There were some tokens of applause (the distant approaches of the thunder which was ere long to burst from those serried masses), but silence was immediately enforced ; and the Judge proceeded to “sum up,” and to charge the jury. .

A short time only was occupied in this *formula*, for in a case so clear it may well be called so ; and when it was over, the Jury, without retiring, gave in their verdict of “Not Guilty.”

Then the long-suppressed cheers broke forth, and sounded to the very roof of that thronged and lofty building. There was a shout of congratulation for the young heir ; and another, louder still, for the true friend who had devoted his time and energies to the cause of the widow and the fatherless.

But perhaps the deepest and best feeling in the hearts of all, was one of regret that he who lay in his grave—the man who had won golden opinions whilst he lived amongst them—should not be alive that day to listen to the justification of his wife : for she had been justified, and cleared from all suspicion of having, as a wife, been false to him. During the course of the trial, and especially in Gatherock's speech in her defence, all that had seemed, to Philip and to the world, “con-

firmation strong as proofs of Holy Writ” of guilt in Gertrude’s conduct was clearly explained ; and now, restored to friends and to society, she was again to take her place among the honoured and the respected.

There was one who, with rapt attention above the rest, had watched the progress of that clear acquittal, and that one—need we say it ?—was Helen Langton. She was alone when she left the rapidly-emptying Court, and alone when afterwards she stepped into the train and was hurried away from Bilsden. Well she knew that congratulating friends were thronging round Philip’s widow—round the wife who, though not guilty as he had deemed her, had still deceived him. But there was no bitterness in her soul, nor a thought of envy : for she had, as ever, been true to him, and now could lay her hand upon her heart, repeating the words she had said in early days to the lover of her youth—“I at least have never deceived thee : and now, the desire of thy heart fulfilled, thy spirit will, I trust, find rest and peace.”

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

“ Reflect that Life, like every other blessing,  
Derives its value from its use alone.  
Not for itself but for a nobler end  
The Eternal gave it—and that end was Virtue.”

IRENE.

THE sisters had retired for the night when, on the evening before Lady Thornleigh’s trial, Arthur Brandreth and Edgar stepped from the special train which they had engaged to convey them with all possible speed to Bilsden. In London they had found letters for them, full of the deepest anxiety, endured both for their safety and for the success of Gertrude’s cause.

“We are almost in despair,” wrote Alice. “Not a line or word have we received for months ; and to-morrow we must undergo the long-dreaded ordeal, without either you or Edgar to support and encourage us, and with none of the longed-for evidence to save us from disgrace and ruin.”

“Why, they have never had our letters ! Edgar, to whom did you entrust them ?” cried Brandreth.

“To Naysmith,” answered Edgar, “and with particular instructions that he was to be most careful of their safety.”

“And you gave him the money for the postage ? And no doubt the latter was consigned to his own pocket, and our letters to the flames ! Edgar, you foolish fellow, how could you trust so important a commission to a servant, and that servant a man of doubtful character, hired too in a town like Sydney ?”

“I am very sorry,” began poor Edgar, but Arthur interrupted him.

“Too late for sorrow now, old fellow ; all we have to do is to hurry to Bilsden as fast as steam can carry us, and relieve the hearts of those poor ill-used women with as little delay as possible.”

Scarcely a word was said by either during their rapid journey, but the minds and hearts of both were filled to overflowing. Every moment as it passed seemed an age, so eager were they to remedy, as soon as could be, the mischief caused by Edgar’s inadvertence ; and when the train arrived at its destination, not an instant was lost in finding the well-known house where the lady bailed on a charge of bigamy was lodging.

Alice lay on her bed half-undressed (for she had been with Gertrude till the last moment, and was very wearied), when a rap at her door startled her.

“Come in,” she said, starting up suddenly. But instead of obeying her, the maid-of-all-work (whose nightcap was probably none of the most presentable in appearance) preferred making known the nature of her errand from the passage.

“Two gentlemen as is below, miss, as is wanting to see you and Lady Thornleigh.”

Alice was on her feet in a moment, and hurriedly throwing a shawl over her shoulders, left the room. She had not time either for hopes or fears : for in the passage, and advancing to seek her, was a tall strong man, who in silence quickly ap-

proached and, without a word spoken, folded her to his heart. In the dim light she looked up into his face, bronzed with long travel and exposure, and throwing her own arms round his neck she whispered :

“ My own true love ! I knew you would be with us—I never doubted for a moment.”

“ Bless you for your trust, my darling. And, thank God, too, that my news is good. Edgar is here also, with his mother. And you have had no letters from us ? ” he added, as Alice led him to the little parlour.

“ None for months.”

“ And still you trusted ? Alice ! you are a little heroine. And did I not tell you that I should find you brave in spirit, and strong in health, when I should return from my distant mission ? ”

“ You were a true prophet,” said Alice, blushing under her lover’s admiring gaze, which showed her that, with her flushed cheeks, and eyes bright with happiness, she was beautiful in his sight. “ But what of Gertrude’s son ? Your news is good, you say, and I can read it in your face. Tell me, then, of that poor, unhappy creature. Is he with you ? I half dread—Arthur, don’t despise me—but I feel afraid to see him.”

“ You need not, dearest ; for Henry Considine will disgust you—even in thoughts—no longer. Alice, darling, the poor fellow is at peace.”

“ Dead ? ” said Alice, in a whisper.

“ Ask me nothing now, love, and, above all, say nothing of this to your sister. If she be not greatly changed, all her courage will to-morrow be required of her ; and, that being the case, we will no longer keep her from her rest. Your dear eyes are growing heavy, too, my love, and we are also greatly in need of sleep. God bless you, then, and hope everything for to-morrow.” And with a kiss of fond affection, he left the happy woman to her thoughts.

When Lady Thornleigh returned from the Court-house, triumphant in her acquittal, her first act was to shake hands with Brandreth with cordial and grateful vehemence.

“ How everything has prospered, dear Arthur,” she said, “ everything. But I am so anxious—you can guess how anxious—to hear all you can tell me of my son. He returned with you, of course, but I suppose that his grandfather ——”

“Lady Thornleigh,” said Arthur, gravely, “you are most unfortunately deceived. Would to Heaven you had received our letters! But you must allow me to speak to you alone—a few minutes only. Alice, love, leave your sister and me together.”

Lady Thornleigh, rather awe-struck at his tone, saw her sister leave the room regretfully, for she was half afraid of Brandreth’s uncompromising straightforwardness; there appearing, however, no remedy, she submitted with the best grace she could assume.

Arthur, who was seated in a chair opposite to her, took his hat from the table, and turning it about slowly, endeavoured to draw Gertrude’s attention to the deep crape that covered it. Finding, however, that she did not speak, he broke the silence by saying in a low voice :

“Lady Thornleigh, I am in mourning for your son.”

“For my son! Oh, Heaven!”

“For your son, who, afflicted by Providence and despised by men, lies at length in his peaceful grave, to rise again in a world where the sinless ones shall see no more sorrow, and where tears shall be wiped from all faces.”

“But my son was not ‘afflicted by Providence,’ ” cried Gertrude; “my son was ‘blest with more than common beauty;’ my son was ‘perfect in intellect;’ surely, Mr. Brandreth, you cannot have received my letter, for in it I told you that (as I always suspected) I was not the mother of that shocking——?”

“Hush,” said Brandreth, rising hastily; “for your own sake stay your words; for the terrible expletives you would use, will, I trust, shock you to think of, when you learn the truth. Lady Thornleigh, you gave too hasty credence to the villain, who, till his latest hour, deceived you and all the world. It was with a deep-laid purpose, namely, that of gaining, by the aid of a confederate as infamous as himself, the disposal of the Considine estates, that Peters wrote the letter which has so misled you. It remains for me to set the matter right, and impart to you the truth. The child at whose very name you shudder, was your own, but you must not think of him as he *was*; but, if you can, in another and a more endearing form. At Sydney a terrible accident, in which his skull was fractured, had the effect of restoring him to sense and intelligence, and with the improvement in his intellectual faculties, his person

also improved marvellously. See, I have brought his likeness—a photograph I had taken of him at Sydney—it is very like, and I thought that you might value it.

Lady Thornleigh took the portrait, but her tears fell so fast upon it, that she could scarcely perceive the lineaments that she looked on.

“Another time,” said Arthur, as he gently removed it from her hands ; “another time you will, perhaps, be better able to trace and value the look of gentle resignation which is so plainly evident to those who knew and loved him. He had not the gift of speech, nor could he hear the words of affection from those around him ; but during the time he spent in the Sydney Hospital, the Sisters of Mercy had been unremitting in their endeavours to raise his intelligence to a view of higher things, and had even taught him to express himself in the mute language practised by the dumb. Lady Thornleigh, it was through your son’s agency that we were enabled to procure the evidence that saved you yesterday ; and it was by the light of his heaven-sent ray of prophetic wisdom that I, who have so long wandered in the darkness of unbelief, have learnt to trust at last in God.”

“Mr. Brandreth,” said Lady Thornleigh, in a broken voice, “I little thought that my poor son was such as you describe. Since that letter, indeed, which you say contained such false intelligence, I had learnt to forget that I had ever thought of him as mine.”

“Take back his memory, then, and fix it in your heart, dwelling on him as on one who is now a disembodied spirit in the mansions of the just. He died without even a passing pang, and so peacefully, that I, who watched him as he lay with half-closed eyes, and with his fingers resting on my own, scarce knew that his spirit had departed.

‘We thought him dying when he slept,  
And sleeping when he died !’ ”

Much more was said by Arthur ere he left Lady Thornleigh to her own (and, as he hoped, her salutary) reflections. In that long conversation she learnt the character and position of the individual on whose identity as her own son she had so proudly congratulated herself : but it would, perhaps, be advisable (even at the risk of drawing too largely on the patience of the reader) to recount as succinctly as possible the sequel

of Brandreth's adventures, as they were detailed by him at different intervals to the various members of the family.

When Edgar Thornleigh, accompanied by the young English settler, arrived in hot haste to Arthur's rescue, they found that a moment later and they would, in all human probability, have arrived too late. The rain had ceased, and the opening of the door of the hut let in a flood of moonlight, that revealed at once the scene within. A sharp struggle for the possession of the pistol had already commenced, and so excited were the two men that the sound of approaching hoofs was heard by neither. The new-comers at once threw themselves upon the miscreant, whose name (as they afterwards learnt) was Taylor, and flung him heavily on the ground.

“By ——!” he ejaculated fiercely through his set teeth, “you'll repent of this day's work, my fine fellows. You don't know who you're insulting—you don't know that I'm a gentleman—you don't know, perhaps, that my name's Considerine, and that I could buy you all out. Come now, don't be a b——d fool,” he continued, addressing Brandreth, who was engaged in effectually securing his prisoner. “Don't be a d——d ass,” and he twisted and writhed under the grasp of his captors. “I can give lots of money—I can——”

And so for a while he ran on ; but at length, finding that no one either listened or answered him, he subsided into moody silence.

In the meanwhile, minute inspection of the interior of the hut was being carried on by the rest. All within gave tokens of the fearful contest that had taken place ; for the floor was flooded with blood, and the furniture was capsized in the midst of it. Their first act was to raise the body of Peters and examine it ; then the cause of his death became evident, how it came about having been evidently after this wise :

Brandreth well remembered that the desire for self-preservation had partially dispelled the cloud that had obscured his faculties, and that, with all the strength he could muster, he had engaged in the struggle for existence. The keen blade of a knife flashed before his eyes, but with his own right hand he grasped the murderer's wrist, turning the sharp point backwards ; and then the limbs of the two men having entwined round each other, the efforts of the armed one were of course concentrated on the attempt to use the weapon that he held. His weight, as he pressed heavily against the slighter frame of

his antagonist, told terribly in favour of the former. Arthur, driven backwards with a force that he strove in vain to resist, felt that his strength was failing, and that his very moments were numbered ! The hot breath of his antagonist came hissing on his face, and one last farewell to home and happiness had risen from the depths of his panting heart, when there came a sudden shock, a fall, a fearful yell of agony, and he lay on the ground stunned, but living.

A very humble instrument had been employed to save his life, one no more important indeed than the wooden stool on which, but a few minutes previously, he had been soundly sleeping. Over it his foot had stumbled, and he fell. The violent and sudden shock had also brought his enemy to the ground, and Arthur being undermost, the murderer's knife (which in the death-wrestle had been pointed towards his own throat) entered a vital spot, cutting through the carotid artery, and causing instantaneous death.

The body of the dead man (repulsive as was the task) was immediately searched, in the hope of finding on it some documents of importance ; Taylor meanwhile looking on with a sneer of triumph at their evident disappointment when nothing worthy of note was discovered by them. So odious, indeed, was the expression of his countenance, that his captors felt by no means inclined to seek information in that quarter—a quarter, moreover, in which it seemed scarcely probable that anything of importance was likely to be gleaned.

It was anything but an enlivening reflection that nothing but disappointment seemed likely to follow on their labours, at least so far as related to the discovery of any new fact concerning the death of Gertrude's husband : but it was a satisfaction to feel that they had rescued her helpless son from the clutches of his persecutors (for the frantic assertions of Taylor had passed almost unheeded) ; and *that*, as they both endeavoured to persuade themselves, was a reward sufficient for their exertions.

The night was now almost drawing to an end ; and bodily fatigue proving an overpowering foe to the indulgence of thought, they threw themselves on the rough beds, and slept profoundly. When they awoke, the sun was shining in at the door of the hut ; and Brandreth, on opening his eyes, perceived that the young settler had been busily employed in making the strong green tea which is the staple of an Australian break-

fast. A very good specimen of his country was that adventurous English gentleman ; his manner was frank and free, and his countenance and cheerful talk pleasant both to see and hear. He had already been some years in the country, and had always, with the exception of his two Chinamen, lived alone : but it was evident, from his complexion, his conversation, and his bearing, that he had kept aloof from evil companions, and had never indulged in any of the low vices so common in the Colony.

Edgar looked at him almost with affection, for, besides that he had shown himself most zealous in their cause, he was (when young Thornleigh roused himself from his slumbers) in the very act of administering food and drink to Henry Considine, and performing the office with the care and tenderness of a woman.

“What are you going to do with that pleasant-looking shaver ?” he asked, pointing to the prisoner, who either was or pretended to be asleep.

“Give him up to the police as soon as possible,” answered Arthur, to whom the question was addressed, and who was now apparently quite restored to health and strength.

“The sooner the better, I should say. But, by Jove ! this is a rum chap too ! Why is he always pointing into that corner ? Look at him now—he’s at it again. I say, old fellow”—he was beginning, addressing himself to Henry Considine.

“He’s deaf and dumb,” said Edgar, pityingly. “There is no use in questioning him.”

But though they did not make inquiry of the speechless creature, they acted on his hint, and proceeded without delay to investigate the spot to which his finger had invariably pointed.

There, and close to the place where Peters had first fallen, they found the papers which proved to be of such inestimable importance. They had been secreted in a box under the earth of the floor, and through the instrumentality of Gertrude’s neglected son they were thus almost miraculously brought to light.

On an examination of the papers many hidden mysteries connected with Peters’s guilty life were made apparent. There is little use in dwelling (to the interruption of the course of our narrative) on the events which followed on the death of

Peters, and the delivery to the officers of justice of his miserable associate. The latter was conveyed safely to Sydney, to which place also the intended victim of rapacity was also taken, with every care and attention that money could procure for him.

Arrived at the city, the letters that were awaiting their return were of course the chief objects of interest both to Brandreth and to his friend; but, for the first time, their perusal was productive rather of pain than of satisfaction. There was one from Lady Thornleigh, enclosing that of Peters, in which the latter had asserted that the rescued unfortunate was not her son; and there was also one from Alice, but she (greatly to their momentary satisfaction) doubted the good faith of Gertrude's unprincipled correspondent. But then, to counterbalance that ray of comfort, there flashed across them the words let fall by Taylor on the moment of his capture—words in which he hinted that he was indeed other than he seemed!

Hard indeed to endure were the conflicting feelings that racked their minds, while, with doubts now unconfirmed, and at the next moment appearing almost in the light of certainties, they gave the evidence which doomed him who was possibly in blood so near to one of them, to a disgraceful punishment. Strictly within their own breasts they guarded the secret; nor was it till after the condemnation of Taylor to penal servitude for life, that they were relieved from the terrible uncertainty that weighed them down.

Shortly after his conviction Brandreth visited the prisoner in his cell, and, by dint of much and well-addressed persuasion, extorted from him a partial confession of his delinquencies. By this means Arthur convinced himself that the statement made by Peters to Lady Thornleigh was utterly without foundation; and he moreover learnt what had been the ultimate purpose of the foul plotters whose schemes he had so fortunately circumvented. The object of Peters in undertaking the journey to Australia had clearly been (as Brandreth afterwards explained to Lady Thornleigh) to obtain the assistance of a confederate, who being in age, and to a certain degree, in appearance, available for the purpose, might be passed off upon the half-doting old grandfather as the rightful heir to his wealth. Just such a coadjutor presented himself in the person of a young lad (one of the steerage passengers) who

had come from England in the same ship as Peters, and who was the identical youth who accompanied him from that time in all his wanderings.

It had been agreed between them that they were to be joint partakers of the old man's riches, and there remained no doubt of the ultimate disposal, meditated by the pair, of Gertrude's unfortunate son.

During the voyage to India, the patient invalid appeared at first to revive, and to recover from the shock he had experienced in the Australian hut ; but his constitution had been so weakened by a long-continued course of ill-treatment, and by the narcotics (some portion of which Arthur had inadvertently drunk), which had for years been constantly administered, with the intention of keeping the helpless being in a state of torpor, that it was soon evident to all who saw him, that his life could not be much longer prolonged. For hours he would lie upon the deck watching the waves as they rolled past the vessel, and the clouds as they sailed across the sky ; and sometimes he would repeat, with his wasted fingers, the few holy words the pious nuns had taught him. But gradually, and as they left the more temperate regions, his strength declined ; and it became day by day more clear, to those who watched over him, that the fervid sun which now glowed above their heads, shone far too fiercely over the feeble brain of the nearly exhausted sufferer. There was no appearance of suffering on his face, but only a look of patient waiting, and a ray of pleasure when Brandreth took his seldom-deserted post beside him. And so, by slow and scarcely perceptible degrees, his life ebbed away ; but as it neared its close, he seemed to have a restless anxiety to express a dying wish to Arthur. His head was resting on the breast of his faithful friend, and he looked up, with eyes beautiful in their fervent trust, to Heaven. Then taking Arthur's hand in his, he raised it with his own towards the sky. There was a placid smile upon his countenance, and Brandreth thought—it might be fancy—that he made the sign of the Cross. Then his peaceful eyelids closed, and—all quietly as he had lived—he breathed his last. They buried him beneath the waters of the Indian Ocean, and returned to tell the touching story of his sufferings, his patience, and his release.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

“Explore the dark recesses of the mind,  
In the soul’s honest volume read mankind,  
And own in wise and simple, great and small,  
The same great leading principle in all.”

CHURCHILL.

ABOUT a week after the trial, Brandreth (whose time was too fully occupied to permit him to perform the duty himself) requested Dr. Burrowes to pay a visit to the aged man, who, in his priest-ridden old age, had caused, by his cowardly selfishness, so vast an amount of human misery.

Old Considine was now arrived at the limits of human life, but his faculties, feeble though they always had been, were still clear, and it was with a perfect recollection of his former intercourse with Brandreth, that, on the announcement of Dr. Burrowes (who came with credentials from Arthur), he desired the Doctor to be admitted to his presence.

“And how is my old friend?” asked he, when the cough by which he was harassed allowed him to mumble out the words.

“Quite well, and lately returned from Australia,” shouted Burrowes in his ear, for the old miser had grown both blind and deaf.

The name of the distant country touched a chord in his memory. “Australia! that’s where my poor son went. I had two sons,” he continued, with the garrulity and expansiveness of old age, “but I never saw them since they were children. They were fine boys, but noisy, sir, and I could never bear noise. That’s many years ago, and—” but here his voice was checked by a cough.

“Would you like, sir, to hear something of a grandson of

yours ; a fine young fellow, who is married, and is now in great distress ?”

The words were no sooner spoken, than the door of the room opened almost noiselessly, and a man with a dark face, closely shaved, and clothed in black, entered.

The old man’s hands trembled visibly as he endeavoured to rise from his chair, but was prevented by his nervous weakness.

The Priest (for it was no other than Mr. Carden) put out his hand to Burrowes, and pressed that of the latter with unctuous softness.

“A friend, I am sure,” he said softly. “Pray do not let me disturb you,” for the Doctor, with native politeness (in which was perhaps mingled an instinctive dislike to the new-comer) was preparing to depart.

“You find our old friend tolerably well, I hope—a little weak, but that is to be expected.”

“I came on business,” said Burrowes, rather abruptly. “Did you ?” asked the Priest, more softly even than before. “That is a pity, as Mr. Considine’s medical adviser forbids all mention of business matters in his present weak state—at some future period perhaps. May I inquire where you are staying ?”

Dr. Burrowes saw at once all the carefully-hidden machinery, and perceiving how utterly useless was his stay, took his leave.

Mr. Carden drew his chair to the old man’s side. “You have done wrong,” he said, “in giving admittance to a stranger. The welfare of your soul and the rights of the Church must not be risked, and there will be many seeking to turn you from your duty. It behoves you, therefore, my son, to make up your last accounts, and that without delay. You have much to leave, even though this heretic woman may not have made a pervert of your grandson, and even though the relations you suppose to be in Australia should be still living.”

“There is a little—a very little ; a thousand pounds, perhaps,” mumbled the old man, almost inaudibly.

The Priest knew of tens of thousands, and pursued his victim steadily.

“However small the sum,” he said impressively, “that sum you have promised to the Church, and the Church will not be defrauded of her due. To-morrow—no, this is Saturday—on Monday then ; there must be no more delay, and the will,

which you have so long delayed to execute, must be at length drawn up and signed.”

Tremblingly, and almost peevishly, the old man gave his consent; but when the Priest touched his thin fingers as he bade him farewell, he felt (so cold and damp had they become) that the eight-and-forty hours' delay he had accorded might perhaps turn out to have been a dangerous indulgence, and that there was risk to the Church's interests in allowing the present moment to pass unprofitably.

Meanwhile the result of the trial, by means of which Lady Thornleigh's character had been cleared from public reprobation, was felt in more ways than one by the designing woman by whom it had been instigated. She was poor now; for her son, who had inherited from his father a mania for speculation, had induced her to put out her not over-large capital at a high, and, of course, at a dangerous rate of interest. The consequence was, that there remained for her use but a very few yearly hundreds, an income which she was, however, ingenious in making what is called the most of. She had a small lodging, the first floor of a house in Cambridge Terrace; and there, with her maid, she had, for two years previous to the trial, lived penitiously and alone.

Mrs. Wraxham was at that period about sixty years of age, of a small spare frame, and of an excitable and choleric temperament. The shock of disappointment at the failure of her long-cherished plans told heavily on a constitution already weakened by years and anxieties; and two days only after the acknowledgment of Edgar's rights over Thornleigh Abbey, his father's scheming cousin was stricken with paralysis.

It was a serious case, and one that required unremitting care and attention; for the patient had not only been deprived of the use of her limbs, but also of the power of speech.

In health she had not cared to conciliate the affections of those about her, and it followed that in sickness and dependence, she was delivered over to the tender mercies of strangers.

Billy Wraxham paid a daily visit of inquiry to his parent; but her usual attendant was no other than the woman whose “professional” services had been called in on the occasion of Sir Philip Thornleigh's decease—the woman in short, by whom Helen was accosted so rudely when she revisited the chamber of death.

By trade Mrs. Jerdan was both a nurser of the sick and a watcher by the dead ; and in both capacities Mrs. Wraxham's maid had had experience (not exactly personal) of her fitness for her duties. The woman had tended the paralyzed lady for five long days and nights, and still the latter had neither moved nor spoken, but lay there, to all appearance a living corpse.

But though no signs of sense were shown by her, the busy mind was at work within, gnawing and fretting (like some caged animal) the conscience, and the frightened spirit that held terrible converse in that motionless frame. How she repented her that she had not been better prepared for such emergency as the present ! How eagerly she longed for speech wherewith to make known her wishes ! But all in vain were her inward repinings ; for no word or sign escaped her, and she could only lie motionless on her bed, thinking the thoughts that God alone could read.

The profession of the “Crone” now dozing in the huge armchair was no secret to the unhappy Mrs. Wraxham, who watched her nervously with sleepless eyes. Long had those eyes been riveted on that stout and somnolent form (for it was after the midnight “beer-time,” and an hour claimed by prescriptive right for peaceful slumbers), when, somewhat suddenly, the sleeper aroused herself, and after a shake of her fat shoulders and a long-drawn breath, stealthily approached the door. For a moment or two she listened, and then carefully closed and locked it. That done, she drew from her pocket a bunch of keys, and, selecting one of them, inserted it in the lock of a bureau that stood on one side of the bed. From that receptacle she drew forth such of its contents as appeared to be of value, restoring some of them to their places, and consigning many of the smaller articles to the custody of her capacious pockets. At last her attention was attracted to a large paper parcel carefully sealed and secured. This she opened, and perceived it to contain a large book bound in purple morocco, and much ornamented with gilding. Mrs. Jerdan knew well to whom that book belonged ; for the despised one in the death-chamber (but she who was a rich and greatly respected lady now) had, before Sir Philip's burial, caused it through his servants to be minutely described, and had also offered a large reward for its recovery.

Most fortunate did the worthy woman deem herself when her eyes lighted on the prize. Had she examined it more closely, her self-congratulation would doubtless have been greater still : as it was, however, she merely considered it in the light of a “missing article of little value to any but the owner,” but “good,” she hoped, for a fifty-pound note for the finder of it. Unfortunately, the volume was too large to be forced into Mrs. Jerdan’s usual receptacle for stolen goods, and she was deliberating how temporarily to dispose of it, when she heard a step ascending the stairs. To push back the various possessions into the bureau, and to close and lock it, was the work of a moment ; but the purple-bound book she had only time to cover with a shawl from observation, when the handle of the door was turned, and, hastening to open it, she perceived that the intruder was no other than Mrs. Wraxham’s son.

“Go,” he said, “and inquire if Dr. Thompson is within” (the medical adviser was a new neighbour). “I am leaving town shortly, and wish to see him before I go.”

The nurse left the room and the house, noticing as she did so that a hired cab was waiting at the door. In a few moments she returned with the Doctor, who was fortunately at home ; and then, Mr. Wraxham having desired her to withdraw, she betook herself to the sitting-room, full of a project that she had been maturing during her walk. This project was no other than to write at once to Mrs. Vaughan, mentioning her discovery, and claiming the promised reward. It was her safest plan, she thought, for the book was too large to hide, and a change might come—sick people were so *contrary*. It was clear as daylight that her harvest had better be made at once ; so, though not by any means a ready writer, she sat down to the table, and before many minutes had elapsed, the following note was the result of her labours :—

“MADAM,

“I ave found the bouk you was a louken for at the deth, I was atendin—it is a big blou bouk with gold on it. I ave it at Mrs. Wraxham’s ouse, and shall be appy to wate on you Madam about it.

“Your umble Servant,

“ANN JERDAN.”

The letter was directed to Mrs. Vaughan, at the house where Philip had breathed his last ; and the writer having deposited it in the nearest post-office, returned, with as much rapidity as her nurse-like obesity would allow of, to the bedside of her employer.

To describe the feelings of the latter during the overhauling of her valued treasures would be impossible. There was a faint hope in her mind that the long-secreted volume would, in its paper covering, be overlooked ; but when she saw it drawn ruthlessly forth from its concealment, her anger, and with it her desperate longing for words with which to give her passion vent, were at their climax. To no one had she confided the fact that the record of Philip's last wishes was in her possession. To her son she had never been communicative ; for it was in her nature to be mistrustful even of him, and her innate love of power had induced her to preserve a secret which might tend to keep others in subjection to her will. But added to these reasons, it must be mentioned that Mrs. Wraxham had been too long the correspondent of the ingenious villain Peters, not to be well aware of the value of an initiation into a mystery such as this. Well had she known of late the motives which had induced that scheming man to mislead her as to the date of Considine's death ; and readily could she imagine the amount of bribes for secrecy which would have been levied on her had Peters lived, and had she been successful in the suit she had instigated.

But there was yet another motive which led to the concealment (on Mrs. Wraxham's part) of the much-sought-for volume. She disliked Helen much, but her envy, and consequently her hatred, of Philip's widow were greater still ; and to enrich the latter, even though at the expense of the former, was not to be thought of for a moment : so the “page” on which so much depended lay hidden from the light of day, till it was dragged forth at last by the hands of a hireling and a thief.

Whilst these events were passing in the dismal London lodging, amidst guilt and suffering, revenge and every baneful feeling, a very different scene was being enacted in the old Abbey, where grateful and affectionate hearts were met together.

The Thornleigh family were not rich enough to keep up what is called an “establishment,” but it costs no more (at

least so they agreed among themselves) to inhabit a small portion of a large house than the whole of a more humble one ; and this decision being arrived at, and all their hearts inclining towards their old home, they lost no time in taking possession of it, as the future residence of the remaining portion of the family.

That family is reduced now : for Alice, who had followed her sister's fortunes through adversity and disgrace, is at last rewarded for her long self-sacrifices by becoming the happy wife of Arthur Brandreth. They have been six weeks married, and, after a short holiday from business and from thought for to-morrow, have returned with all their hearts and energies to the work of life.

Alice is spending a day or two at the Abbey, and is seated in its small library with those she loves so dearly. It is nominally the summer time ; but the evening is chilly, and a wood-fire is burning on the hearth.

“ He will not return this evening, I fear,” said Alice. She was speaking of her husband, who had been summoned to London that morning on urgent business.

“ How I should like to see WanBORPE ! ” exclaimed Marie. “ Mother, shall we not go there some day ? It is only twenty miles from this, and I could drive you in the pony-carriage, and Edgar could——”

“ Walk, I suppose,” interrupted her brother, laughing. “ I am afraid, my dear Marie, that our resources are too limited for such an expedition at present. The old pony is on his last legs ; and as for mine, they will do no more than carry my own person. I suspect, therefore, that we shall have to put off our visit to WanBORPE till the old stables are better filled than they are at present.”

“ There is so much to see there,” said Alice (who was an eager participator in all Brandreth's schemes and pursuits). “ We could hardly do it all thoroughly in two or three days ; but when Arthur has time we will all go with him, and he can make room for us in his ‘ hut.’ It will be a scramble, but I shall, beyond measure, enjoy showing you all that has been done :—the busy women—the clean, well-conducted children—the——”

“ But there is one person at WanBORPE whom I would rather see than all the schools, or the children, or the trade-teaching.”

The speaker who had so unceremoniously broken in on Mrs. Brandreth's remarks, was a very young girl, who was seated on a low stool at Lady Thornleigh's feet. She gave promise of future beauty ; but as yet the bud had scarcely begun to open, and the full sweetness of the flower was a thing to come.

“And who is this person ?” asked Edgar, looking at the girl with some degree of curiosity.

“Mrs. Vaughan,” was the unhesitating answer ; nor was there anything in her manner to show that she had heard that name spoken of as a forbidden one.

Edgar looked annoyed, and Lady Thornleigh and her sister exchanged glances.

“You know,” continued the last speaker, “that she is to be a sort of matron there—a ‘Lady Superintendent.’ I know not what her office will be called, but she is already constantly at Wanthorpe, and we, who live so near, hear much of the good she does there.”

“And has Mrs. Duncan been to the ‘Home’? and has she seen Mrs. Vaughan ?” asked Alice.

“Not yet. You know that poor mamma has not been strong lately, but directly she is well enough we are to see Wan-

thorpe, and I look forward to the visit as to one of my greatest pleasures.”

While she was still speaking, her brother had left the room. His movements had been unnoticed by the young girl ; but the sisters had been more observant, and again they looked at each other meaningly and anxiously.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

“Use every man after his desert, and who shall escape whipping?”  
SHAKESPEARE.

“Her ‘prentice han’ she tried on man,  
And then she made the lasses, O!”—BURNS.

WHEN Mrs. Vaughan received the ill-spelt and worse-written letter indited by the scheming Mrs. Jerdan, she at once surmised who was the author of the epistle; nor did she for a moment doubt that the volume alluded to was the one for which she had so long and so anxiously searched. The motives for the woman’s conduct in thus revealing the secret to *her*, instead of to those who would be benefited by the discovery, were at first a mystery to her; but when she had reflected on all the circumstances of the case, the nurse’s intentions and objects became more clear. Reckoning, doubtless, on Mrs. Vaughan’s natural desire to retain possession of her wealth, her correspondent (whose knowledge of the peculiar value attached to her prize appeared to the former an established fact) was probably looking forward to a rich harvest to be reaped by herself in the shape of hush-money.

Impressed with this conviction of the woman’s intentions, there appeared more reason even than before to believe that the story was not a fiction. Mrs. Vaughan at once determined to take no step in the matter without the advice of Arthur Brandreth; and with a heart full of hope, that at last all her solemn promises to the Dead would be fulfilled, she wrote a private letter to her old friend, begging him to call upon her without delay. Arthur lost no time in obeying the summons; and after hearing her report, resolved to go to Mrs. Wraxham’s house and endeavour to see the writer of the letter.

During his absence, Helen sat in her pleasant room (the room which she had made to look so homelike) and pondered on many things. There was scarcely one feeling that was not happiness, in the thought that she was to surrender Philip's wealth to his son—but there was one feeling, and the cause of the exception lay in that son himself. Sir Edgar had adhered to his resolution of holding no communion with Mrs. Vaughan, either by letter or personally. In vain had Brandreth, Mrs. Duncan, and others of his dead father's friends, endeavoured to soften the bitterness of his feelings. In vain had Helen herself written to implore that he would take the income, even though the law forbade her to make over to him the entire property: he was not to be appeased, and stedfastly refused to be bought out of his unforgiving feelings towards his father's mistress.

It was on this great source of regret that Helen pondered while Brandreth was absent on his mission. Her suspense was not of long duration; but when her envoy returned, she was dismayed at the look of disappointment visible on his features.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, “it is a trick, a vile deception! I see it all—and how foolish I was to hope!”

“Not exactly that,” said Brandreth, as he threw himself on a chair. “The book was there, but it is gone—taken away; and probably—nay, I think certainly—by no other than Billy Wraxham.”

He then proceeded to give Helen the details of his interview with Mrs. Jerdan, and to relate how that, on returning to the sick-room, the latter had (according to her statement) found Mr. Wraxham gone, and with him the treasure she had so lately found.

Helen was terribly disappointed: and there being nothing particularly cheering in Arthur's suggestion concerning Mr. Wraxham's appropriation of the prize, she ventured to suggest that that gentleman should not be allowed to retain it with impunity.

“There is no doubt that some communication must be had with him,” said Brandreth; “but as to the how, I must consult Gatherock, and perhaps Johnnie Paulett. Indeed, I will endeavour to see the latter at once”—and on that errand he again departed.

Johnnie was at his club when Arthur, a quarter of an hour

afterwards, called upon him, and begged for a few minutes' private conversation. To his surprise, Paulett did not enter warmly into any plan which was likely to cause riches to flow into the hands of the Thornleighs.

“Don't ask me to help you,” he said, almost splenetically, “either by advice or anything else. I have no doubt that brute Wraxham has the book, and I should let him keep it. Why is Mrs. Vaughan to give up everything to that prig of a fellow, who has never been even commonly civil to her?”

“I think I had better see Gatherock about it,” said Brandreth, who had not noticed the momentary ebullition of his friend's ill-humour.

“I would, if I were you ; but take care what you are about with him ; he is rather a bad lot, and hasn't the command of feature he used to have. I can read evil deeds on that parchment face of his, and a lawyer's countenance ought to look as close as a letter-box.”

“Do you think there would be any use in writing to Wraxham—through a lawyer, of course ?”

“Don't ask me,” said Paulett, putting on his gloves ; “for I will give no advice that might facilitate the impoverishment of Mrs. Vaughan. And as for young Thornleigh, he may go to the d——l for what I care !” And so saying, Johnnie drew on his gloves, and went relentlessly on his way.

A week or thereabouts had elapsed after this highly unsatisfactory interview, when we find a party of three assembled in Helen's drawing-room. The time is late evening, and the weather sultry and oppressive. Near the open window is the mistress of the house, who is engaged in conversation with Arthur Brandreth. There is no light near them, but at the far end of the room is a lamp, shaded with rose-coloured paper ; and near it, with the subdued glimmer shining on his broad massive forehead, sits Edward Burrowes.

It is a singular face that, which, bending over a learned book, looks as though the innermost feelings were at work, even while the head is occupied by the outpourings of another's mind.

Dr. Burrowes is not a happy man, nor does he look like one. His early love for his cousin Helen, and his undying sorrow for her fall, have tinctured his character with a shade of bitterness which is for ever tainting the flavour of such drops of

sweetness as will sometimes fall to the lot of every man. His love had ceased from the moment that he had heard of her disgrace ; but he had pitied her from the first, and would have travelled many a mile, and undergone many a hardship, if by so doing he could have served her.

On his return from the East, the successful military surgeon—he who had won such honours as men in his profession may, in the fierce campaign which wrung so many hearts, and made so many home-hearths desolate—returned with the intention of henceforth living in retirement on the savings of his years of toil. But in forming this resolve, the Doctor had not reckoned on his own restored health, nor on his reviving desire for action and employment. A few interesting cases, attended from charitable motives alone, were sufficient to call up again all his professional ardour ; and he was soon—sooner, perhaps, than he had either wished or expected—plunged into the busy life of a London practitioner in good request.

He was, as we have said, a man of singular appearance, with a high rugged forehead, long grey hair, and a projecting chin. His dress was scrupulously clean, but his clothes hung about him loosely. Altogether, he looked what people are wont to call “a character ;” and it may be that the peculiarity of his outward man, as it had not marred his professional prospects, had not been without its use in furthering them. For some ten minutes he had been occupied with his book in a distant corner of the room, but then Helen called him ; and laying the volume down, he pushed the spectacles higher on his forehead, and slowly approached his friends.

It was no new thing for Edward Burrowes to attend to Helen’s call ; for, as he had truly said when he met her after years of absence, she was his one relation—his only tie to England and to home. So it was his habit and his fancy to be near her as a protector and a friend ; though the deep love of his heart had faded beneath the stain that rested on her.

“ You are tired, Edward,” said his cousin, kindly. “ Come and rest, by telling us of your doings of to-day.”

“ Of to-day ?—no. But let me see :—it’s a week since we have met, and during that time I have attended a case, and heard some news that will interest you.”

“ Of whom ? And what is your news ? Rest your eyes take off your spectacles, and tell your story.”

“I was sent for,” began the Doctor, literally doing as he was bid, “by Juan Considine’s wife ; the husband came to my house with a request that I would go at once to see his child, who showed symptoms of illness. He was a forlorn-looking little being enough, with his threadbare coat, battered hat, and wizen black-and-tan face.”

“Katie Reilly used to think him a good-looking puppy once,” interposed Brandreth.

“And thinks so still, perhaps,” said the Doctor, “notwithstanding the general seediness of his appearance ; for it was through her, on the occasion of Mrs. Considine’s last confinement, that I first became acquainted with the family. They were apparently in better circumstances then, for they had two rooms, and were on a lower floor ; a week ago they were in a garret. Well, I agreed to visit the child, and, taking Considine with me in the carriage, I set off with him at once.

“The house where they lodged was in Martin’s Lane, a little street which, as you may perhaps know, leads out of Cannon Street. The room occupied by the Considines was at the very top of a house the lower storeys of which appeared to be let as ‘offices.’ The staircase was narrow and dirty, qualities which increased as you ascended ; and the door that gave admittance to the miserable attic was ill-fitting, and almost destitute of paint. Such a close stuffy room it was, and so low, that my head, even in the centre of it, touched the ceiling. There was scarcely any furniture—a truckle-bed, a ricketty table, and a low chair (in which sat the poor young mother, with her boy upon her lap) being almost all that the room contained. The aspect of that unhappy woman was forlorn in the extreme as, striving to speak calmly, she said that her poor child was sick. ‘Doctor,’ she said, ‘I don’t know what it is ; he has seemed heavy and dull for days, but I gave him medicine, and he has been willing to eat sometimes ; he is not very ill—only dull.’ Dull indeed ! with staring eyes and face of bluish white ; his head was of unusual size, and the forehead prominent, while (worst symptom of the whole) he picked at his little fingers anxiously and incessantly. ‘Not ill, Doctor ?’ repeated the mother, in a voice of affected cheerfulness. I laid my hand on the hot head ; and on counting the pulse, that was galloping on to the winning-post, I knew that the short heat—the two-year-old race—would be over soon, and

the little heart would cease to beat. The mother never took her eyes from my face. I felt she did not, and knew that in her gaze there was a silent questioning.

“‘I will send some medicine for him,’ I said, but I know that my voice sounded in her ear ominously.

“‘Not much the matter, Doctor?’ and there was still the straining effort at a lively manner. ‘The child is a little fanciful, and sleeps badly. Perhaps it’s want of rest that makes him look so dull. Last night he had bad dreams, and screamed, calling out that strange beasts were about him, and that cats were running along the ceiling. Was that fever, Doctor?’

“It was DEATH, but I dared not tell her so.

“‘Keep him quiet,’ I said, ‘and to-night at ten I will call again.’ I was turning away, when the thought struck me that it was cruel to leave her to endure the sudden shock of her child’s dissolution without a word of preparation for the event. ‘Mrs. Considine,’ I whispered, ‘I cannot leave you without a warning of the blow which we may not be able to avert. Your child is ill, dangerously so ; he has water on the brain, and a few hours may, I greatly fear, decide his fate for life or death.’

“She did not faint ; perhaps, had the boy not rested on her arm, she would have done so, but strong maternal instinct kept her stationary ; and she only shivered, and turned paler than before. Considine laid his hand upon her shoulder. ‘Margaret, dearest,’ he murmured, but she never looked at him ; and I, as I left them to their sorrow, felt, as I have often done before, that when the mind of one who endevours to console is feeble, the attempted comfort is offered in vain.

“I had scarcely reached the lowest stair when I was overtaken by Considine.

“‘Sir,’ he cried, hurriedly, ‘you will send something for the child? ‘We are——’ He was going to add that he was destitute ; I saw the words upon his lips, and that he could not utter them. Expressions of encouragement were in my heart, and would have found vent in words ; but at that moment, and before I had time to answer him, a letter was placed in his hands. It was sealed with black, and the edges of the envelope were of mourning hue. Considine opened it at once, and glanced over its contents. ‘Good God!’ he exclaimed ; and covering his face with his hands, the letter fell to the ground. ‘What is the matter?’ was my very natural query, but the

weak creature could for the moment make no answer. Then I picked up the letter and, putting it into his hand, reproached him for his pusillanimity. ‘Be a man,’ I said; ‘remember your wife and dying child. What is all this? Has good news come to you? Then hasten to share it with her who is suffering alone. Come; be a man I say, and act like one.’

“Frightened, perhaps, at my rough tones he uncovered his face, and putting the paper into my hands he signed to me to read it. The tidings he had received were certainly startling and momentous—no less so than the announcement that the bigoted grandfather who, by depriving him of his wretched pittance, had reduced him almost to beggary, had been summoned to give an account of his stewardship, and that he, whose wife and children were dying of starvation above-stairs, was the inheritor of countless thousands.

“It was not till the next morning early that I could find time to revisit the poor attic-chamber in Martin’s Lane. It was quite silent then, and on the bed was a small recumbent figure covered with white drapery. Mrs. Considine rose from her chair on my entrance, and removed the handkerchief from its face. It was a dismal spectacle, for the countenance bore a look of agony, and the eyes were staring wildly. The mother laid her thin trembling hand over the glazed pupils. ‘He cannot close them,’ she said, piteously. ‘He was better after you left us, but on a sudden he screamed out loud to his mother, and hid his face within my bosom. Then Juan took him, and walked about to quiet him. He thought he was asleep, and, having laid my darling on the pillow, we both rested for a while. We did not know that he had left us;’ and the dry tearless eyes looked lovingly on the dead child.

“‘And where is your husband?’

“‘Gone out; he said he must.’

“She spoke no word of wealth or coming prosperity; there was a question in my mind as to whether she had heard the news. I remained with her till Considine’s return, and was struck by the change that news of riches to be his had wrought upon his face.

“‘Little woman,’ he said, almost lightly, ‘our troubles are over.’ (Over! with that burthen on the bed. Poor mother!) ‘There is comfort in store for us, and for the child that is left.’

“She did not answer him, but turning sharply to me, asked if riches could have saved her child.

“‘They could not,’ was my unhesitating reply.

“‘I am thankful,’ she said; ‘for could you not have told me so, I should have cursed the gold, and the soul of him whom death has taken in his cruelty and wickedness.’”

“And have you seen them since?” asked Helen; “and is the mother beginning to be reconciled?”

“I saw them when the child was buried, and she was thankful, poor soul, that the little body of her darling would not have a pauper’s burial, or be hurried in the ‘funeral train’ (that dreadful last express) along the South-Western line of railway. But what do I hear? A ring; a visitor, who may perhaps help to shake off the effects of my gloomy story.”

The words were scarcely spoken when the door was thrown open, and Katie Reilly, followed by her faithful escort, Paulett, entered the room. But before describing the scene that ensued, we must devote a short chapter to an explanation of the causes which induced Mrs. Reilly to pay a visit to her long-neglected benefactress, and that at an hour when it was fair to suppose that her advent would produce surprise at her appearance, if not indeed a feeling of anger against herself.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

“Plate sin with gold,  
And the shining lance of justice hurtless breaks :  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy’s straw doth break it.”

SHAKESPEARE.

“Woman’s at best a contradiction still.”

POPE.

IT was late in the evening (ten o’clock, or thereabouts) when Johnnie Paulett and pretty Mistress Reilly were, in the sultry July season, enjoying the repose of an almost silent *tête-à-tête* in Katie’s little drawing-room. They had been dining at Greenwich with a large and joyous party—the present moment being the *entr’acte* between that amusement and the still more exciting one of “Cremorne.”

Katie looked languid and tired: she had thrown her little gem of a Paris bonnet on the sofa, with an utter disregard to the preservation of its frail beauty; and leaning back in her arm-chair, by the open window, she fanned herself drowsily with her laced and perfumed handkerchief.

“And how was ‘Bone-setter’ this morning?” asked Johnnie, who was tired too, but who thought it necessary to keep up something like a conversation. “Bone-setter” was one of Katie’s high-stepping brown cobs, about whose health some anxiety had been lately felt.

“Better, I believe,” said their owner, carelessly; “but it’s all one to me now, for I’ve set my heart on a pair of silver-greys that Anderson has just got up. Such beauties you never saw; but Pershore is screwing ’em down hard, and won’t give within a ‘fifty’ of what they ask. I’ll be losing ’em afther all, I am afraid; and Loo Evans is thryng to get

'em, and if she does, I'll——” But here Katie paused, and, setting her small white teeth together, looked like mischief.

“ You'll do what ?” said Johnnie, who was in a state of (what may be called) indolent amusement.

“ I'll just let Sudbrook know about her and Billy Wraxham.”

“ No, you won't,” said Paulett ; “ you never did a spiteful thing in your life ; and, besides, he's going abroad, and——”

But he was interrupted by an exclamation from the versatile Katie, of—“ Ah now ! here's a letter on the table from one I haven't heard from this long while—Juan Considine ! Thick paper ! Coat-of-arms ! What a swell he's grown ?” And so chattering, she opened the letter, read it, and clapped her hands for joy.

“ He's dead !” she exclaimed. “ The old fellow's dead—more power to him !—and has left no will, and Juan has it all ! He says the priests came about the old sinner, but they could make no hand of him, for he was palsied and couldn't understand. But it's all right ;” and again she clapped her hands joyously.

“ What a lucky dog !” said Paulett.

“ Yes ; and but for the wife, he'd have been away in America. They've been as poor as can be, with the two children, the crathurs, and he sick ; and the wife—she didn't know me—but I went to see them. I said I was a near friend to Juan's third cousin, once removed, on the father's side, and sure I saw then the wife had the sinse.”

“ You're a good little girl,” said Johnnie ; “ but on their own merits modest women are dumb.”

“ What's that ?” asked Mrs. Reilly, sharply.

“ Nothing—go on.”

“ There's nothing to go on with—only they'll be in heaven now, by the blessing of God. And they say women haven't the sinse that men have,” she added, musingly.

“ Who says so ?”

“ Dr. Burrowes ; he told me women's brains are ever so much lighter than men's—any number of ounces ; five I think it was !”

“ That was on an average.”

“ Not at all ; it was on the scales. The Doctor says that, being light stuff, thoughts come quick to us, and that we can't hold 'em together. But now, Johnnie, just think what a great

man Juan will be ! Ten thousand a-year ! Sure, there's one good little goose will be a clever man out of the face. And there's another—young Hemingsley ; his uncle's dead, and he'll be my lord now—just one more of the empty pitchers with the handles to 'em. Won't he be said to have the sense now, the little booby !”

At that moment the servant, unbidden, brought in the lamp.

“Ah, now !” said Katie, “don't be bringing in the light, and the night so hot, and the moths coming in by the dozen.”

The man was about to depart with the obnoxious “luminary,” when Paulett interposed, saying :—

“Let it remain. I want to look at your new pictures, which I have scarcely seen.”

Katie made no further objection, and he commenced his journey round the small, but beautifully decorated apartment.

“Those pictures are bank-notes, Pershore says,” murmured Katie from her arm-chair ; “or you might take your oath they wouldn't be here. Is it the *Grooze* ye're looking at ?” she asked, perceiving that Paulett had taken up his station opposite to one of the most valuable pictures in the collection. A lovely female head and bust it was—very young and fair, and most voluptuous, both in colouring and expression. But beautiful as was the delineation, its charms were at that moment all unheeded by Johnnie ; for he had drawn a large volume from a pile of other well-bound drawing-room books, and was examining it attentively. On a sudden he said (turning round towards the mistress of the house), “Katie, how long has this book been in your possession ?”

“Is it the ‘Faëry Queen ?’ Ah ! yes, I see. About a week I think it is. Why do you ask, now ?”

“I want to know where you had it from.”

“Do you ?” said Mrs. Reilly, provokingly.

“Yes ; and, Katie, do you know that you might do a real service to—to—”

“To—to,” said Katie, imitating him. “Now, just speake out, and tell me who you're maning. Is it Loo Evans ?”

“Loo Evans !” ejaculated Paulett, in a voice of such scornful disavowal that his questioner's suspicions were quelled at once. “Loo Evans !—no, but one who has been

very kind to you, and who would be glad to hear that this book is safe.”

“Is it a lady that’s been kind to me?” asked Katie. “There’s not too many of them to count that has. Who’s the party?”

“The lady is Mrs. Vaughan,” said Johnnie, in a voice differing greatly from his usual tone of lively banter.

“And is it herself I can be of use to?” cried Katie, rendered serious in a moment by the mention of the one name that she both loved and respected.

“Is it the book she’d like to have? Take it to her at onst, and niver say who it came from.”

“But, Katie, tell me,” asked Paulett, “have you never opened this volume? Have you seen nothing that’s in it?”

“Nothing but the picturhs: it was just night when I got it, and I did not think to look again.” But as she spoke she took the book from Paulett, and then, guided by his hand, read the one page which made the book (to some at least) so valuable.

“But sure,” she said, looking up at her companion with a bewildered face—“sure Mrs. Vaughan couldn’t be afther wanting this to be seen? Shall we burn it? She’d be never the wiser;” and, standing on tiptoe to reach Johnnie’s ear, she whispered her suggestion.

Johnnie laughed, while he laid his hand affectionately on her shoulder. “You horrid little plotter!” he said, “do you think I feel it a pleasant duty to make Mrs. Vaughan a poor instead of a rich woman? But we must be honourable, Katie—honour among thieves, you know—and, besides, Mrs. Vaughan has been longing for this book for years. Give it to me, there’s a dear little girl, and it shall go to its rightful owner. She will thank you when——”

“I’m not quite so sure of that,” said Katie (to whom the act of disinterestedness foretold by Johnnie seemed a most improbable and unnatural proceeding). “I’m not at all sure Mrs. Vaughan would thank me, and so I’ll just go and see for myself.”

“And Cremorne?”

“Hang Cremorne!” cried the girl, as with reckless haste she dragged Johnnie into a cab, desiring that her carriage might follow her to Mrs. Vaughan’s house. On their way she was

profuse in her expressions of affection and admiration for the lady they were about to visit ; but withal she seemed, in her own person, nervous and agitated to a degree for which Paulett could scarcely account.

“Sure,” she said, in answer to his queries, “it’s a shame for me to go at all. I haven’t seen Mrs. Vaughan since the day poor little Rhoda died, and she asked me to go again, but I never did.”

“Couldn’t serve God and Mammon, eh, Katie ?”

“And she is so good !” continued the girl, not heeding Paulett’s remark. “And to think that she’s despised and looked down on, while them that have done a thousand times worse are shaken hands with and visited by the greatest in the land. See the names of them at the Ambassadors’ Balls, and the Court, and the Receptions ! My ! but it’s a sight that *they* should have the coronets instead of the shame on their foreheads ! And they to think *her* too bad even to speak to !”

“Katie,” said Johnnie, “you should keep your little tongue from evil speaking.”

“It isn’t lying and slandering, anyway,” said she, laughing at the rebuke ; but even while the smile was on her lips, there could be seen on her face (as the gaslight flickered across its tinted surface) a working as of agitated suspense. The recollection of the last time that she had seen her neglected friend and adviser pressed upon her thoughts ; for Katie’s memory was as retentive as her imagination was vivid, and with the same acute perception that caused her to collect and hold within her busy brain scraps of poetry and apt quotations, did she now recall with terrible distinctness the closing moments of Rhoda Mason’s life, when, with the girl’s dying breath upon her cheek, she prayed the prayer that since that hour had been as a laid-by and forgotten thing.

And would Mrs. Vaughan allude to her one passing moment of penitence ? Would she question her as to her present life, or startle her with a threat of the future’s terrors ? Such questions did Katie ask herself as, with Johnnie’s eyes upon her, she knew that every moment drew her nearer to Helen’s house—the house she longed yet dreaded to enter.

They did not speak again during their hurried transit ; but while to all appearance they were watching the countless

vehicles as they were driven rapidly past them, the thoughts of both were occupied with her whose lot in life they were about, with such unwilling hearts, to alter.

When Katie found herself in Mrs. Vaughan's presence she felt (as indeed she looked) heated and agitated. For a few moments she glanced from one occupant of the room to another, as though uncertain to whom she should address herself ; and when at last she spoke, the words came forth in an incoherent manner, very different from her customary fluent mode of speech.

“Mrs. Vaughan,” she said, “it's long since I saw you, and I take great blame to myself for that same—and now I am more than half afraid. Ah, now ! don't look at me so—sure, I would have sent it. I wouldn't have had the face to come, only I wasn't certain. But here it is—I have it with me—I brought it for you—and——” But here, overcome by conflicting emotions, her breath and courage alike failed her, and, fairly breaking down, she burst into a passion of tears.

“What is the matter, Katie ?” asked Helen, taking her hand kindly. “Where have you come from ? and what is it that you have brought to me ?”

“It's the book,” answered Katie, in a significant whisper, between the intervals of her sobs.

“What book ?” asked Mrs. Vaughan, more than ever mystified by the reply.

“Would you like I should show it, and them by ?” asked the girl, still whispering.

“Show what you have brought,—I hate concealments,” said Helen, impatiently ; and thus urged, Mrs. Reilly, with a look half of triumph and half of distress, drew forth her treasure.

Helen seized the volume, and gazed at it with eager eyes. She recognised it at once, but then came the pang of alarm lest it should have been robbed of what she held so dear, and would thus be rendered comparatively worthless in her sight. “Was all safe within ?” was the question she asked herself, but it was one which at first she could not summon courage enough to solve.

“It's all right,” said Katie, in wild excitement ; “I found it. Billy Wraxham had it. He's going away, and I asked him for it. Oh ! Mrs. Vaughan, tell me you're glad ; say I've done a small thing for you at last.”

“ You have indeed,” answered Mrs. Vaughan, who had by this time opened the pages of the book, and convinced herself that the precious “leaf” had not been tampered with. “ Dear, dear Katie, you have rendered me an inestimable service—one which I can never repay ;” and drawing the girl towards her, she kissed her with warm and grateful affection.

“ Katie,” said Johnnie, “ you are like the mouse in the fable ; but if I were Mrs. Vaughan, I should hardly thank you for nibbling me out of this net. And now, suppose you tell us how you did it ?”

“ Well, it was just this way,” said Katie, whose spirits were now quite restored to their usual height. “ You know Billy’s going from his creditors ; they’re afther him now that he won’t have the esthate. I went to his house to see Loo Evans, and all his things were lying about—such a dale of foolishness I never saw ! The book was there amongst them, and I took it up ; there was only a little light in the room, and I said, ‘ Billy, I want a keepsake ’—(and I did, for he’s not such a bad little fellow, afther all)—‘ will you give me this ?’ said I.

“ ‘ Troth, and I will,’ said Billy ; ‘ it’s just one of the books that were lying about at my mother’s, that I took away for fear the women would be fingering them.’ But he’d hardly done spaking, when up jumps Loo to see would she like the keepsake herself. But I wasn’t going to be *said* by the likes of her ; and so she took the book one end, and I the other, and Billy, who was writing, d——d us both. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Vaughan. But at last I gave Loo a shove (you know Loo, Mr. Brandreth ; a tall, dark girl—a leetle bony), and I rather think she fell down ; but I didn’t stay to ask was she desthroyed at all, but just made off with what I’d got.”

Mrs. Reilly was warmly congratulated on her courage and presence of mind ; and after graciously accepting her proper meed of praise, she prepared to take her leave.

“ Once more, thank you, dear Katie,” said Mrs. Vaughan ; “ and remember that if I can ever be of use to you, it will make me very happy.”

“ Indeed, I’ll remember it, and no mistake,” said Katie, “ for you’re a true friend to those that are in throuble.” And she shook Helen warmly by the hand. “ But,” she added, turning to Brandreth, “ be sure and not *let on* it was me, if you hear Loo’s the worse for the crack of the head she got.

I'd be scared to have a Secretinary of State's warrant afther me—bad cess to it!” And closing the door, they heard her merry laugh as she and Paulett hastened down the stairs. A few moments later, those within the house were listening to the rapid trot of her high-stepping horses, as they rattled away towards that haunt of the idle and dissipated—the much-abused and much-frequented “Cremorne.”

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## CHAPTER XL.

“Il y a une espèce de honte d'être heureux à la vue de certaines misères.”  
LA BRUYÈRE.

“Qui non vetat peccare cum possit, jubet.”  
SENECA.

MARY DUNCAN was accurately informed as to Mrs. Vaughan's movements when she announced that the latter was in the habit, not only of frequently visiting Wanthorpe, but of taking an active part in the duties which were one day to be officially made over to her. Already there was a house appropriated for her especial use ; and in it, and in the very centre of the tenements where the poor were working busily, she, who was eventually to direct the labours of some amongst them, spent many a day and hour—making herself intimately acquainted with their characters and wants, and gaining a great and beneficial influence over them. It was difficult not to feel softened, roused, and encouraged by her cordial manner, and by the hopeful, sympathizing voice in which she talked to those rescued girls and women ; whilst in many of them there seemed to be springing up a healthy belief, that since there had been found one being, kind and (as they felt) good, who did not disdain to have fellowship with the repentant ones, her example might be followed by others, and more might in time be found willing to deal mercifully with them.

Helen's pleasures at Wanthorpe did not consist solely in the luxury of doing good ; for she possessed one true friend, who, living not far away, followed the dictates of her heart and conscience, and visited her frequently.

By holding this open and acknowledged communion with the despised woman, Mrs. Duncan (for it was of Helen's Indian acquaintance of years gone by that we are speaking), gave occasion to many (and among them were those of her own kindred) to reproach her for defying the wholesome and time-honoured laws of a virtuous society ; but Mrs. Duncan was not to be frightened out of her resolve both to be and to show herself Mrs. Vaughan's friend, and many were the peaceful hours of familiar intercourse they passed together.

Mrs. Duncan's trials had been great, and were evidenced in the resigned and patient expression of a face on which grief had traced many a furrowed line, and in the snow-white hair that was so smoothly banded beneath her widow's cap. Her husband lost his life in the Indian mutiny, and her only son had fallen by his side. She had two daughters—one who had married and settled at a distance, and the other the young (and, to her, most precious) girl whom we have already seen seated at Lady Thornleigh's feet, and hoping for the day when her mother's friend should be also hers.

Helen had striven hard (and with a rare and unselfish feeling) to persuade Mrs. Duncan that there was possible imprudence in allowing her daughter to become intimate with one who lay under the world's ban. Finding, however, that this was a theme on which her friend would scarcely allow her to discourse, she with grateful affection drew both mother and daughter into her large and loving heart, and held them there.

It was a lovely summer's day, about a fortnight after the occurrences detailed in the last chapter, when a large party, consisting of the high in rank and fortune from the various country-seats round Wanthorpe, agreed to meet there by invitation of its owner, and under his guidance to inspect the various works, schools, and buildings connected with the vast establishment. When all these sights had been seen, they were to dine *al fresco* under the spreading trees of the rich domain which Brandreth had given up for the great work he had undertaken ; and many would doubtless wonder, as they gazed on the lovely glades where once the deer had browsed,

and on the “ Palace Home,” now turned to uses so different from those dreamt of by its former owners, that a human being had been found so insane in his disinterestedness and generosity as he who was now their host.

Among the guests who will meet at Wanthorpe is our old friend Francis Herbert. Time has not spared him, nor has his character greatly softened since we saw him last. He is still severe, especially upon faults the temptation to commit which he does not understand ; and his judgment of Mrs. Vaughan, and of her unfitness for the office she is to fill, has been always harsh and strongly expressed. He and Brandreth are riding together towards the place of *rendezvous*, and the former has just reverted to a subject which has already been frequently discussed between them.

“ Surely,” Herbert was saying, “ you might have found others as willing to work for you as Mrs. Vaughan, and whose antecedents would better bear investigation? How can you expect those unhappy women to respect their superior, when—”

“ My dear Herbert,” broke in Brandreth, in a tone of playful authority, “ I really must insist on an abolition of some of the old-established terms, nor will I hear of my repentant Magdalens being called ‘those unhappy women.’ They have sinned even as (with more or less temptation) we all have done ; but with long-suffering Charity leading them by the hand, and with Hope holding up her torch to light them on their way, I do not despair that some at least among them may be not only good but happy women yet. And as for Mrs. Vaughan, who (as I need not tell you) has been the greatest benefactress to this institution (for she has given to it her all —namely, the £40,000 saved for a holy purpose out of her income), as for her, why, her sin was put away from her years ago ! and shall we, who are registered on high as laden with iniquity, be less merciful than a sinless God ? ” And he was turning his horse’s head towards a narrow pathway, when Herbert stopped him with another question.

“ And do you think that you have really effected any good, and that one girl—one woman—has turned from her evil course, and shown undoubted proofs of a desire to amend her life ? ”

“ Among the very lowest, and the miserable ones, there are many ; but that was to be expected—for here, at least, they

have clothes, and food, and shelter. But I am happy to say that our promising ones are not confined to these ; for there are amongst them some who were not driven to us by actual hunger, and by the misery of being shelterless. They had but just tasted of the poisoned cup, and the excitement of a life of sinful pleasure had not become a habit with them. Of these we have good hopes ; but to expect that the followed and flattered ones—those whose every passion is being gratified—will change their life while in the possession of youth and health and beauty, is to expect a miracle which, I greatly fear, will not be worked in our behalf.”

“ And what do you expect will be the ultimate lot of the reformed ones ? ” asked the Rector.

“ That depends partly on the amount of Faith, Hope, and Charity which may be wrought upon in their behalf. Some may, perhaps, be bold enough to take into their service girls who have been first unfortunate—then sinful—and who, finally, have proved themselves to be deeply and sincerely repentant ; but, happily, we have other plans and resources for their future. They are all earning money, a portion of which is laid by for them, and which will probably eventually take them to some distant country, where their former errors are unknown. You must not, however, imagine that it is principally with the adults and older women that I feel our mission lies. Prevention is my watchword, and the children are consequently our especial care. The rising generation of the poor may—if the rich join hand in hand—escape some of the temptations under which so many of their parents have fallen ; but the evil is doubtless on a gigantic scale—so gigantic that most men turn away from the work, disheartened by the seeming impossibility of success.”

“ Seeming impossibility,” echoed the Rector, with a marked emphasis on the first word.

“ Yes, and only seeming ; for it is a cruel belief that there must remain for ever upon our country a plague-spot, foul and spreading, such as this. There are places, Herbert, in our magnificent London—in that city where countless millions are daily risked and spent—which would shame the low-viced and degraded capital of the vilest heathen despot. There are places (and I need not tell it to you) where drunken, desperate mothers give birth to child after child whom they destine to be

a source of gain, and rear to a life of prostitution, theft, and every kind of infamy. And is it just, think you, that our laws should punish those young sinners for the faults of which, before God, I maintain that they are not so guilty as those who, seeing them in the slough, pass them by on the other side ?”

“ But, my dear Brandreth,” said Herbert, “ it appears to me that now, as ever, you are preaching doctrines and setting forth theories the practice of which is simply impossible. *Our Nineveh* will not, apparently, be levelled to the ground because of its sins ; and you must bear in mind that you are talking of the homes of tens of thousands—homes (foul though they be) which are valuable property—the most valuable, as I have heard, to the landlords who appropriate the rents of those squalid and overcrowded buildings.”

“ And such men,” said Brandreth, indignantly, “ can forget, or disbelieve, that on them will fall, like an avenging thunder-bolt, the heavy wrath of God in the world to come ! Why, the very stones of this our Babylon might cry out against those who amass their thousands—thousands gained by the rapid increase of our vast population, and who, while they own the streets and palaces, the reeking courts and overcrowded alleys, where starving, sinning wretches live and die in crime, can look coldly on, doing nothing, or worse than nothing, to remedy the evil.”

“ Theirs is indeed a fearful responsibility,” mused Herbert ; “ but in your rather wholesale condemnation of the rich, and zeal for reformation, you seem to forget the magnificent and costly London charities ; the Ragged Schools, the Model Lodging-houses, the many Refuges for the Destitute. I know little of London or of its beneficent institutions, but I hear of these things, and believe in them.”

“ And so also do I—and have, moreover, unbounded faith in the excellence of the motives by the promptings of which those admirable institutions were called into being. But after all, these are little more than palliatives—dangerous palliatives even, inasmuch as they tend to the retarding of more fundamental and vigorous measures. Many a generation has passed away since London was apostrophised, by one of the wisest of our philosophers, as—

‘The needy villains’ general home,  
The common sewer of Paris and of Rome.’

The perilous stuff collected in the heart of our great city has accumulated alarmingly since those words were written. The Sewer is far deeper now, and the filth that it contains more dense and dark. Much has been done, and lavish sums have been expended on beautifying the ‘*outside* of the cup and platter ;’ but for the interior I fear the time is yet far distant when its cleansing will be thoroughly and extensively effected. Were the nurseries of crime levelled to the dust, and were the light of day let into the vile refuges of the criminal, the sum-total of evil deeds must of necessity be lessened ; for, their places of safety destroyed, the fear of discovery would act as a wholesome check. It is the existence of such vile places as I am speaking of that is a blot alike on our Legislature and on the wealthy classes ; and till something be done to remedy the evil, not all the London schools and charities, nor all the refuges which I trust may, after a while, spring up in the country, will be able to effect much towards the prevention of crime. And can you declare to me, Herbert—can you, who have thought seriously on these subjects, maintain that the landlord is not in a great degree responsible for the vicious acts of his tenantry, when he allows the one small room for which he receives his miserable rent to be inhabited (as is too often the case) by adults of both sexes, mingled together in a hideous, festering mass of impurity and pollution ?”

“ Responsible ?—yes,” answered Herbert. “ But the sweeping changes you advocate call for enormous individual sacrifices, which I fear will never be made.”

“ If we could but enlist men’s vanity in the cause,” remarked Arthur ; “ vanity which, under high-sounding aliases, is the moving principle of so many seemingly noble deeds, we might have some chance of success.”

“ But,” broke in the Rector, unceremoniously interrupting the musings of his friend, “ I have one more question to ask, and that one is, how you intend to dispose of those dangerous animals, should you be so fortunate as to destroy their dens ?”

“ With the greater number there would be, I think, no difficulty,” replied Arthur ; “ for happily there is in distant countries, and especially in our own colonies, far more than the ‘ rood of land ’ which, in the days of ‘ Our Bold Peasantry,’ sufficed to ‘ support a man.’ Changed air—changed scenes—

changed associations, and, above all, the absence of congregated numbers, work wonders in producing reformation ; and in the Antipodes the scum of the London population may be purified and worked off into a better and less dangerous material. Not a few of the children would doubtless remain upon our hands ; but of them (as I have said before) there are good hopes. But a truce with our discussion for the present ; for we are coming within sight of the great growing child of my adoption—my dearly beloved though greatly altered Wanthurpe.”

But before proceeding further we will take a look at the place of which its Founder and Friend spoke so lovingly. “Wanthurpe” has spread and grown since last we visited it ; for (as Brandreth had once truly remarked) there were very many among the rich and charitable who had only waited to learn to whom and how to give. Neither had the projector of that useful and now prosperous scheme been in error when he declared that, even in a pecuniary point of view, something might in time be realized by the combined industry of so many human beings, all working under the eye of the master, and each stimulated by hope for their own future advantage and well-doing in other lands.

It was a numerous assemblage that, under the guidance of Arthur Brandreth, was now occupied by a tour of inspection of the Wanthurpe wonders. Of the party there were several who looked suspiciously upon the “wild plans” of him who (like Philip in days gone by) they still persisted in denominating the “new man.” Among those rather narrow-minded individuals was our old but slight acquaintance, General Owen. He had become almost an aged man, and looked worn and haggard ; but his step was still firm, and his military figure as upright as ever. It had been a disappointment to him that, at the last moment, Edgar Thornleigh had been prevented (by a telegraphic despatch sent by the lawyer Gatherock) from joining the party ; for the General was attached to his old friend’s son, whose conduct, decorous, and not habitually selfish, formed a strong contrast to that of his own headstrong and spendthrift boys. Marie, who was also a great favourite with the old man, was leaning on his arm, and from time to time whispered, for her own consolation as well as for that of her companion, that Edgar would be sure to come later, it was but an hour by the train from London,

and that he had promised to do the “impossible” both for his own pleasure and for hers.

Among the joyous group who were taking their pleasure on that brilliant summer-day, there were few who thought at all, and fewer still who thought with charity, of her to whom so much of the excellent arrangements (in one respect at least) were owing. The fact was, that the county in which was situated the domains of Wanthurpe and Thornleigh Abbey, had always experienced a feeling of animosity against the woman who had been enriched at the expense of one of their most important and honoured families.

It was in vain that Brandreth endeavoured to enlist their sympathies in her favour. He was hardly listened to, and the obnoxious Helen remained as much as ever the object of opprobrium and suspicion.

“And you really see an improvement in those boys?” asked the General, pointing to a number of lads who (it being the hour of recreation) were enjoying the noisy games of higher-class schoolboys. They were sharp-looking children (oversharp, perhaps for their years), and many of them required not a little of the *surveillance* of the masters.

“We hope we do,” was Arthur’s cautious answer. “They are well kept down—crushed like a field of young oats that has sprouted up too quickly. They are carefully removed from the temptation either to lie or steal, and, moreover, they are obliged to be obedient, though they are never frightened into falsehood.”

“It sounds like good discipline,” said the General, approvingly. “But, may I be allowed to ask who those children are, and where you discovered them?”

“Almost literally in the streets,” answered Brandreth, with a sad smile. “Some are orphans, while others are cursed with still greater misfortunes in the fathers who begot and in the mothers who gave them birth. Look at their countenances: young as they are, there is scarcely a childish face amongst them. But we do not despair; for vice had not in these cases grown habitual, nor had the power to act rightly become the impossibility which the desponding prophet spoke of when he said that it is ‘easier for the Ethiopian to change his skin, and the leopard his spots, than for those to do good who are accustomed to do evil.’”

“*Repente nemo fit turpissimus,*” quoted Herbert, in an under-voice. “I fear, Brandreth,” he continued, turning to his friend, “that your holding them back from the abyss will be of little avail, for original inclination will probably be too strong for you, and that directly the restraining hand is removed, those knowing-looking young gentlemen will again follow the multitude to do evil.”

If so, the sin will be on their own heads,” said Arthur, seriously. “But let me move on, for I am desirous to show the ladies some of the women’s work. Not come together yet?” he added, addressing a respectably-dressed middle-aged woman, by whom his ring for admittance at the door of one of the largest buildings was answered. “My dear Lady Travers, I am sorry; but this part of the ‘show’ must, I regret to say, be put off till after dinner. This is a half-holiday—a fact which I had forgotten. It is granted in honour of our Sovereign’s birthday, and with the hope of keeping the memory of exalted virtue in the hearts of the poor, the tempted, and the fallen.”

Gaily, and with many a lively sally and sportive jest, the brilliant company seated themselves in the pleasant shade, appreciating alike both the bright summer-day and the luxurious repast that had been prepared for them. The branches of the ancient lime-trees feathered almost to the ground, and were laden with perfumed blossoms. A scent of crushed fern-leaves and of distant bean-flowers mingled in the balmy air, while from beneath one giant monarch of the woods cheerful voices sounded. Corks from pleasant-looking, long-necked bottles flew round, and goodly dishes tempted all to eat and to enjoy.

“I am glad you left yourself a tree, Brandreth,” said a robust gentleman, as he handed his plate for a second supply of lobster-salad. “You are not quite for a community of goods, which is agreeable under the circumstances.”

“Neither quite, nor at all,” said Arthur, smiling. “But I have discussed my opinions and projects enough, considering that I am a perfect tyro in politics, and am yet in my A B C as regards any statistics whatever.”

“No,” remarked the General, who was also apparently forgetting that there is “death in the *lobster* pot”—(a serious mistake after seventy)—“no, you are too Quixotic, I fear, to

know much about the ‘Ways and Means,’ or you would not have given up such a place as this to the rabble.”

“But I have not given it up,” said Arthur, deprecatingly.

“No, but you can’t live in it—you don’t enjoy it,” suggested a pretty married lady, who liked every place to be open for everything.”

“I should never have enjoyed Wanthurpe as a home,” said Brandreth, with a half-sigh; “so I have little merit in what the General calls ‘giving it up.’ I prefer my other estate, and with two such possessions as mine, surely it was not too much to utilise one, as I have done!” And having so spoken, he turned the conversation to other subjects.

Need it be said that Society had long since ratified the judgment of the Court of Assize, and pronounced Lady Thornleigh’s pardon? Nor was it pardon only that she obtained for the deception she had been guilty of; for in her favour (now that she was again established at the Abbey) many a former stone-thrower could find an extenuating circumstance. No shame was felt by those who in her adversity had repelled and disowned her; they had but done their duty in upholding the cause of virtue, and, by reprobating vice, showing how unpleasant in their nostrils was the savour of it! Well, we will not blame them; for what is the use of bristles if they are not to be erected, and why is the world so good if it cannot show its detestation of the bad?

Lady Thornleigh had an heir-apparent—poor, doubtless; but there are always contingencies, and how many young ladies have married on them alone! So it was therefore that Gertrude, despite the cloud that had so long obscured the brightness of her reputation, was welcomed cordially among the magnates of her county.

They did not all keep together, that pleasant company; for four of the ladies (namely, Mrs. Duncan and her daughter, Lady Thornleigh and Alice) had repaired to Arthur’s quarters. It was not the first time that they had visited Wanthurpe; but it was the only occasion on which Lady Thornleigh had run the smallest risk of meeting with Mrs. Vaughan. At any time such an occurrence would to Gertrude have been distressing and annoying in the extreme; but to come in contact with the “proscribed one” while numbers of curious spectators were witnesses of and commentators on the event would, to one

so weak as Philip's widow, be unendurable. This was Gertrude's reason for seeking the privacy of Arthur's “hut”; nor could all Alice's assurances that, on such occasions as the present, Helen remained strictly secluded in her own house, have any effect in persuading her to remain with their friends.

It was to the magnificent mansion which Arthur's father (one of the wealthiest of our merchant-princes) had built in the centre of that beautiful domain, that his son and the inheritor of his wealth now conducted his guests. They ascended a flight of broad stone steps, and from a beautiful portico entered the hall. This, also, was on a large and lofty scale; and from it the visitors proceeded into numberless spacious rooms, all given up to the various uses and labours of the women who were employed within the extensive walls. The description of work done was of different kinds, and some of a sort hitherto considered unfitted for the hands and the intelligence of women. But they were all busy, all earning money, and all grateful when the ladies purchased specimens of their industry and ingenuity.

Meanwhile some of the gentlemen, while engaged in eager discussion, had allowed the ladies (with but few attendants of the other sex) to wander about the building seeking entertainment as best they might. Perhaps, while so employed, some of the young and the unthinking ones might have deemed it a waste and a desecration that those magnificently proportioned rooms should be filled to overflowing with poorly-dressed and toiling females. If such, however, were among their thoughts, they gave no utterance to them, but looked and smiled, and admired, as though their hearts, too, were set upon the good work.

At length they came to a long and narrow corridor, in which were several doors, all covered with thick green baize. From the rooms within no sound was heard; but, impelled by curiosity, one of the ladies pushed against the nearest door, which at once yielded to her touch.

Those thoughtless visitors had (unknown to themselves) intruded into a portion of the building that was not generally open to the public. Within those mysterious-looking entrances were certain inmates (patients they might well be called), whose mental state required the greatest and the most

unremitting watchfulness. Helen was seldom absent for any length of time from the trying duties which the care of those poor creatures (whose minds and resolves were tottering on the giddy narrow fence which lies between good and evil) entailed upon her. Often in the night was she summoned to still the ravings of some poor sinful girl, whose feeble nerves, diseased by excitement, had utterly given way ; and for hours would the noble woman remain with her, soothing and counselling one whose glory so lately was in her shame.

It was to a case such as this that Mrs. Vaughan (about an hour previous to the incursion of the “County” ladies) had been suddenly called. She was occupied about what seemed, even to her sanguine spirit, a nearly hopeless task—namely, that of administering medicine to a mind never strong, and now sunk into a despondency so dark that light would scarcely penetrate it.

When Lady Travers (the wife of the Lord Lieutenant, and therefore the first in order of precedence) entered the room with her party, a book was in Helen’s hand ; for she had been reading aloud, and had endeavoured to interest her auditor, but in vain. There was some needlework in the girl’s lap, but she was not occupied with it ; and between her and Helen there stood a draughtboard, on which it was evident that the latter had striven to engage the invalid’s attention. There was no beauty in the face that looked so “old” and dull, but, on the contrary, the features were coarse, and the countenance repulsive : still the wretched being had a soul to be saved, and therefore (uninteresting and all-unpromising as she seemed) the efforts made in her behalf were never relaxed.

Helen rose when the ladies approached. She was vexed at their entrance, and much distressed when Lady Travers, in an audible whisper, inquired of a gentleman near her who that person was. Unfortunately for the object of her curiosity, the latter was known by sight to many persons, and, among the rest, to the one who answered Lady Travers’s question by the announcement that the “person” was no other than Mrs. Vaughan. Lady Travers was the “greatest” lady in the county—a beauty, and a lover of popularity. She had not been quite born to the station she was filling, and previous to her exaltation had been merely known as a pretty, pleasing, good-tempered girl ; but she had entered fully and at once

into what she (in her ignorance) imagined to be the requirements of her new position—not growing “fine by degrees,” but becoming “beautifully greater” from the moment of her exaltation. To those she considered her equals, and also to persons thoroughly and irremediably established in a station beneath her own, her smiles were beaming and profuse; but, pleasant as she could seem, and bright as was her beauty, she could not conceal from the fastidious and clear-sighted the hollowness both of her head and heart.

“So that is Mrs. Vaughan,” she said, in a half-whisper. “Could one talk to her?”

“Certainly, if you wish it,” answered General Owen’s son. “But I will call Brandreth, for I do not know Mrs. Vaughan, and—” In short, Colonel Owen felt (though the ladies did not) the awkwardness of Helen’s position, and would have shielded her if he could.

But while they stood there, the object of their scrutiny was hearing it with a calm exterior, yet with a beating heart. The room was darkened, and in the half-light her beauty looked even greater than it really was. Her figure had lost nothing of its grace and symmetry, and the faultless features were as lovely as in her youthful days. She was dressed, as was customary with her, in black; and the small hands and the still rounded throat gleamed from the dusky shadows of her dress. For a moment Lady Travers glanced suspiciously at an amount of loveliness for which she had scarcely been prepared; and then, recollecting that she herself was among the favoured few who can touch pitch without being defiled, she advanced towards Helen with a radiant smile.

“I believe I am speaking to Mrs. Vaughan?” she said, with a courtesy in which there was unmistakable condescension.

Helen made a slight but respectful inclination of the head, but her heart was throbbing even faster than before.

“We have been so immensely interested,” continued the *puissante* lady. “It really is quite charming to see so many poor people working. Is this one ill? I wonder you don’t put them all into a dress.”

Helen had by this time recovered her composure; and her thoughts had turned towards the girl, whose condition would not, she felt, be ameliorated by the many curious eyes that were fixed on her.

“Will you allow me,” she said, with a gentle and quiet dignity, “to suggest that you should visit some other rooms? These are strictly private; and if you would kindly wait a moment outside, I will ring the bell for some one to conduct you through the building.”

And this was all that Lady Travers’s affability had gained for her—to be requested to leave the room by a Mrs. Vaughan! Her brow grew dark, and the angry cloud spread sympathetically over the countenances of those around her.

Helen felt instinctively that there was danger in the air, and in her deep humility trembled as she was left there standing in their midst.

The ladies, without moving, held an audible colloquy among themselves.

“I wonder what has become of Mr. Brandreth?” said Lady Travers, turning to an acquaintance of stately mien; and Helen noticed how different was her tone when she spoke to a lady who was “within the pale.”

“Indeed, yes,” responded the individual addressed; “where can he be? How very inconsiderate of him to leave us! I never was in such a painful position before.” And one and all looked at Helen as though there were pollution in the atmosphere she breathed.

“Ah!” thought she, in her painful loneliness, “where are my few kind friends?—where the generous Mrs. Duncan, the high-minded Alice, the considerate and true-hearted Brandreth?” And the moments she was passing seemed an age of torture to the humbled woman who endured them.

In the meanwhile Brandreth, little guessing what was passing in that secluded chamber, had (with most of the gentlemen) returned to the entrance-hall. They had scarcely been there a moment, when a carriage drove rapidly to the door, and a young man sprang hastily out. In a moment he was at the summit of the steps, and grasping Arthur’s hand.

“Brandreth,” he said, “did you know of this?”

“Of what?”

“Of what Gatherock knew, and never told me of till all was safe and certain? Of the finding of my father’s will—of my great good fortune?”

“And of the deep debt of gratitude you owe to one to whom you have hitherto neglected to pay even the smallest

instalment,” said Arthur, as he stood with folded arms, looking gravely at the excited young man.

“I know it—I feel it; and I have been to her house, but cannot find her. Brandreth, can you tell me where she is?”

By this time all present were aware of what had occurred, and had drawn round Edgar to congratulate him on “his good luck.” But the heir of Thornleigh scarcely heeded them, and turned again to Arthur with a renewed inquiry concerning Helen’s whereabouts. At that moment a servant belonging to the establishment crossed the hall, and in answer to Brandreth’s question, said “that to the best of her belief Mrs. Vaughan was in one of the private rooms.”

“Let us seek her there,” said Arthur. “My lord,” he added, turning to Lord Travers, “I need not ask whether you are willing to show the benefactor of your old friend’s son, that you, at least, appreciate her conduct as it deserves.”

Lord Travers expressed his willingness to pay this tribute of respect to Mrs. Vaughan. He was a man whom every one respected, and some loved. As fond of popularity as his wife, he had more heart, and was besides sometimes the slave of impulse. In calmer moments he might have thought twice before he committed himself openly as Helen’s partizan (*poor Helen, too, as the world must know her now to be*) ; but *semel insanivimus omnes*, and the Lord Lieutenant—intellectual, graceful, and dignified—could, once at least in his life, afford to make a mistake.

It was when Helen’s confusion and distress were at their height that the voices of the gentlemen were at last heard in the corridor.

The first face that Mrs. Vaughan perceived was Arthur Brandreth’s; but immediately following him came a young man, tall and slight and fair, whom at a glance she knew to be Philip’s son. Arthur led him towards her.

“Mrs. Vaughan,” he said, in a tone of marked respect, “I have brought you one by whom you have been far too long unknown. Edgar, this lady is Mrs. Vaughan.”

The young man bowed timidly, for the sight of the woman to whom he owed so much embarrassed him; but though his words were long in coming, they were spoken to the purpose at last.

“Mrs. Vaughan,” he said, in a low and agitated voice, “I have come to confess that I have been ungrateful, suspicious,

and resentful. I have come, too,” he added, gathering courage as he proceeded, “to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your generous kindness.”

Helen drew a long breath, for her courage and her self-command were nearly exhausted, both having been severely taxed by the demands which during the last few hours had been made upon them. She made a last effort to speak with calmness, but the attempt was signally unsuccessful.

“I thank you,” she said, “for your kind intention; but I require and expect no gratitude for having merely done my duty. And now, will you allow me to pass, for the heat is oppressive, and I am faint?”

The words were barely uttered when all things seemed to grow indistinct around her. The walls appeared to dance and reel—the gathering darkness grew more dense—and, for the first time within her memory, she fell in a swoon upon the floor.

There was no lack now of kindly sympathy, or of prompt assistance in her need; for though prosperity and habits of self-indulgence may engender a forgetfulness of the sorrows of those less favoured, the sight of suffering seldom fails to recall even the spoilt children of fortune to their better selves.

When Helen returned to consciousness, she found herself in the corridor, near an open window, with many helping hands offering restoratives for her use; and the moment that she was strong enough to stand, Lord Travers advanced, and gently drew her arm within his own.

She took it almost mechanically, and with its support slowly traversed the passages that led to the hall of entrance. But not now (as an hour before it had been) was that entrance quiet and deserted; for there, and at the door where none had ever implored in vain for shelter and for mercy, a crowd of women was assembled.

Among them was their benefactor Arthur: Arthur, who had just made known to them the welcome tidings that she they loved and reverenced would no longer come amongst them as a “visitor,” but would live there always—never (God willing) to leave the Home and the grateful hearts at Wanthorpe.

There was a sound of joyful voices, low and tender, when the pale but sweet-faced woman appeared amongst them. The murmur grew and strengthened as, with a faint but happy

smile upon her trembling lip, she passed along the ranks ; and many a fervent whisper of “God bless her !” rising from that untutored crowd, sank in the hearts around, and was heard, we doubt not, in the Courts above !

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### CONCLUSION.

“That time is dead for ever, child,  
Drowned, frozen, dead for ever !  
We look on the past,  
And stare aghast  
At the spectres wailing, pale and ghast,  
Of hopes which thou and I beguiled  
To death on life’s dark river.”—P. B. SHELLEY.

“AND so Mrs. Vaughan is reduced to the necessity of working for her daily bread ? By Heaven, it is too bad !”

The indignant words just quoted were Johnnie Paulett’s, and they were addressed to his friend Brandreth.

“It is her own fault, if fault it be,” replied the latter, “for she will accept of no aid from any one ; and that she will not do so from Thornleigh is that wrong-headed boy’s worst punishment for his long-continued injustice and suspicion.”

“Serve him right,” said Paulett ; “I always said the fellow was a ‘prig,’ and it’s proved that I was right. But you, none of you, know half that woman’s worth ; for it is not your cold, always-right people that can understand and appreciate such a character as Helen Vaughan’s. But I shall pay a visit to your ‘Refuge for the Destitute,’ and ascertain whether, among you, you are not working her to death.”

“We will go there together,” said Arthur ; and before many days had passed, the plan was put in execution.

A year had at that time scarcely elapsed since Helen had seen the friend for whom, notwithstanding his follies and his faults, she entertained so sincere an affection. In those few months a great change had been wrought in Johnnie’s appear-

ance ; for his days had been passed half in illness, and half in the dissipation which he had no longer the constitution to endure, or the inclination to indulge in.

With a quacksightedness which was perhaps the offspring of personal vanity, he guessed what was passing in Helen's mind, and responded to the look, which was one both of regret and inquiry :

“ You see a great change in me—don't deny it—you know that I always hated half-confidences and concealments. I am a great deal greyer, more wrinkled, and stupid. Gad, Helen ! how I do hate to think of old age, and lingering twilight shadows !—

‘Seeing the sunbeams crawl  
Inch by inch along the wall.’

Pah !”

“ But you have so many friends,” suggested Helen, consolingly—“ so many to stand between you and the coming shadow, that you will scarcely perceive it as it steals along.”

“ And do you not know that (according to querulous old Timon) men shut their doors against the setting sun ?” said Paulett. “ But enough of me and of my coming extinction ; you must talk of yourself, and tell me if you really like this life.”

“ Indeed I do, and am moreover convinced that it is the only mode of existence for which I was originally intended. My days are spent (and not unhappily) in preaching and exemplifying the truth of Voltaire's maxim, that '*Le travail éloigne de nous trois grands maux,—l'ennui, le vice, et le besoin.*' ”

“ And your future ?—and when you can work no longer ? Is there any provision assured to you when night comes ?” asked Paulett, with greater seriousness than he usually displayed when speaking of pecuniary matters.

“ The labourer is worthy of his hire—at least so thinks my paymaster ; and in this case he liberally carries out his principle, that in the matter of wages given, there should be enough and to spare.”

“ And the loneliness, from which I confess that I should shrink with even a morbid dread ?” asked Johnnie, with a perceptible shudder at the idea of his own companionship.

“ Of that I have no fear, for a disabled soldier-brother is

coming home to end his days with me ; and the Cross of Victoria on the pensioned Sergeant's breast will in itself be a stimulant and a solace to me.”

“Brave woman !” exclaimed Johnnie, “and true as brave ! But,” continued he, in a lighter tone, “perhaps under peculiar circumstances you might be induced to receive another weak and rather dilapidated brother into your reformatory. Tell me—is there any limit to the age at which sinners may hope to be admitted within the pale of your charities ?”

“No unrepentant ones,” replied Helen, with a smile.

“Then I suspect you have little chance at present of entrapping one we both know of ; for Katie Reilly’s hour of remorse has not yet struck, nor will it, till her sins quit *her*. Should that time ever arrive, she will (as many a woman has done before her) lay the flattering unction to her soul that she has abandoned *them*.”

“Poor Katie !” said Helen, sadly. “A valuable nature was sacrificed when hers was turned to evil ! But I do not despair ; for there is good stuff to work upon, and the time will, I trust, come when Katie’s reformation will be a source of happiness both to her and to myself.”

“*Nous verrons*,” was Johnnie’s incredulous rejoinder. “But I hope that, in the meantime, you are not entirely dependent on the rather remote contingency of Mrs. Reilly’s return to the paths of virtue. I trust that you have some acquaintances—some friends !”

“Indeed I have—and more than I had any right either to hope for or expect.”

“Nonsense !” exclaimed Paulett, authoritatively.

“Anything but nonsense : for the world (and I have almost ceased to wonder at its measures of precaution)—the world will not make a distinction between sin indulged in and sin abandoned and repented of. As long, therefore, as society considers it a duty to exclude women who—women, I mean, like me—from its ranks, it is an act of courage and, to a certain extent, one of self-sacrifice in those few who dare to make themselves exceptions to the rule.”

“What bores women are about one another !” said Johnnie, rather disjointedly ; “you never hear men attacking their own species in this virulent, vicious fashion.”

“Because they have, happily, other and more absorbing em-

poyments; while we, in our restless idleness, allow our thoughts to dwell so much and so unduly on men's notice and admiration that—But I have talked and listened enough, for my holiday-time is over ; and as the sun is setting, I must bid you farewell.”

They were alone, for Brandreth had been called away from them on business ; and as she spoke, Paulett, looking towards the glowing West, saw, through a vista in the trees, that the sun was sinking to rest behind the distant hills. The parting rays shone full on Helen's face, and thence, glancing on the hundred windows of Wanthorpe Court, bathed the stately edifice in a flood of golden light.

“Helen !” whispered Paulett, “you look beautiful in your golden setting—beautiful and bright ! And oh !” continued the world-wearied man, “would that I could hope for a ray like this to shine upon my evening ! Helen ! you would never think it, but it is nevertheless true, that I envy the very beggar in the streets who has the chance of a long life before him ; and there is one light-hearted wretch, who sweeps the crossing near my house, who, when he laughs and sings, calls up within me thoughts which—” But here the expression of sentiment (or, it may be, of something better still) was nipped in the bud by the appearance of Arthur in the distance ; and Johnnie contented himself with adding, while he laughed carelessly—“which makes me feel that it is ‘better to be a living dog than a dead lion.’”

The tears were standing in Helen's eyes while he said the words ; and even as he looked upon her speaking face, the golden light passed from it, leaving it wellnigh in darkness.

Johnnie took her hand, and wrung it with almost painful force. “Farewell,” he said, “and may God bless you ! Helen, I often wish that you could again be my neighbour and my friend ; for I have had my warnings, and when pain and sickness come, I—But enough of this ; for I must seek out Brandreth, and hasten to the train before the last bell has rung. Once more then, fare you well !” and hurrying away, she was left alone.

Another year has now passed away, and the “last bell” has sounded for none of those with whom we have been lingering.

Johnnie Paulett is still mechanically pursuing his daily round of so-called pleasures ; and during the “season,”—though his locks are still more scant, and the lines have multiplied upon his brow,—he may be seen at the window of his Club, in the Park, and at the theatres. Not a few lonely hours, however, has he now to pass, and many a “corporeal sufferance” to endure, with no companion to enliven him, and only his friendly doctor to whom to impart the history of his woes. Edward Burrowes (who has progressed almost into a London celebrity) never accepts a fee from Johnnie, but visits the gout-racked invalid whenever, either as physician or as friend, his services are required. Helen often hears of Paulett from her cousin, but only from him ; for the visit of her old friend to Wanthorpe has never been repeated, and her own means of communication with the world are far from frequent.

From Burrowes, too, she sometimes receives tidings of her whom we have ventured to glance at in this history—of the Katie Reilly who is among the few friends by whom Johnnie has not been deserted in his coming age. To the world Mrs. Reilly seems still to be as fair, as brilliant, and as joyous as in the early days when her career of sin and dissipation was at its zenith ; but there are some behind the scenes—the doctor who counts the beatings of the rapid fluttering pulse, and the attendant who administers the nightly anodyne—by whom a sadder and less flattering tale might perchance be told.

Many are the thoughts bestowed by Helen on the once gay and happy Irish girl ; and even though she hears that the “silver-greys” are still driven by Katie in the Park right furiously, and that in many a scene of revelry the erring girl is nightly met with, her friend does not despair, but, hoping even against hope, awaits the return of the repentant one.

And now to the patient and self-sacrificing woman (who but for the presence of her invalidated brother would be almost companionless), how can we bid farewell ?

She has no longer near her a supporting friend : for Mrs. Duncan—she whose “widow’s curse” of the oil that “maketh of a cheerful countenance” never failed her—has gone to a more distant home. Her daughter is now the wife of Edgar Thornleigh, and the solitary mother has migrated to the neighbourhood of her child.

Philip's widow and the matron of Wanthorpe have never met since the day when, in the inn at Auray, the latter warned Gertrude that, by her wish, their paths in life would remain asunder ; and as, from many varied causes, Alice cannot be often at the “Refuge,” it follows that Helen (when during the long winter evenings she sits by the fire and builds her hope in heaven) has no lack of time for retrospective thought.

When Roger Langton, after the Indian war was over, returned to England, he was a wreck both in body and in mind ; but time and quiet have done much towards restoring to vigour the brain that had been weakened by sunstroke and fatigue, and he is moreover gradually becoming accustomed to the ingenious substitutes supplied by art for the limbs that he has lost in the service of his country. His pension suffices to provide him with the necessities of life ; but the inaction to which he is condemned, and possibly the remorseful memories that haunt him, induce a melancholy and dejection that threaten to become morbid in their character. His sister notices the gathering cloud, and after listening to the outpouring of his heart, discovers that Roger's sensitiveness to the slights which she is still condemned to undergo is one chief origin of his sorrows.

Then Helen, in persuasive accents, reasons with and pacifies him.

“Courage,” she says, “and let us fight our last battle bravely out ; we have only ourselves to thank for the trials and mortifications we have undergone, and but ourselves to accuse in that we—the last of our race—are childless, poor, and lonely. Truly we have sown the whirlwind, and must reap the storm !”

“But now,” urged Roger, “now that your time is passed in doing good, and that the life you lead is pure and blameless, surely it is time that your errors should be no longer remembered against you ! And when I think how powerless is my arm to defend the sister who has given me all, and how unworthy are many who——”

“Hush !” interrupted Helen, laying her hand upon his lips. “Hush ! For the time is past when I could be led away by reasoning such as this, or could flatter myself that a comparison with the offences of others could render my own more venial. But if (as I believe) you love me, and are grateful for

the little aid I was once able to bestow, you will be patient when, in my deep anxiety for your mind's wellbeing, I warn you that even for a mutilated soldier there is work to do. Shoulder your crutch then, brother,” added she, with an encouraging but mournful playfulness, “and, ceasing to indulge in vain regrets, at once be up and doing.”

“But doing what?” asked Roger, startled at her appeal. “Surely you are jesting; for can you look on me, and say that my days for labour are not over?”

“Over!” retorted Helen—“never while you have a brain to comprehend, a soul to feel, and a tongue to utter truths! You are among English hearts, my brother, and in the midst of those who, while they look upon the Cross you wear, will haply listen to your words more gladly than to those of either priest or teacher. Mix with these people, then, dear Roger, and let their interests be yours; believing one who has proved the fact that there is scarcely a soul's weariness that cannot be alleviated by work, or a sorrow that may not be softened by sympathy with the afflicted.

“Once more then, I say, let our watchwords be Faith and Hope; and, following after Charity, let us ‘argue not against Heaven’s hand or will, nor bate a jot of heart or hope, but still bear up, and steer right onwards’ to the haven of our rest!”

THE END.



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